

Cry Havoc

Craig A. Eddy



Book 2 of
The Unholy Wars of Home

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by
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Chapter 1

The Dogs of War (Tuesday)

"What, really, is the balance?" Muriel asked. "I mean, I have an idea of what it means, balancing good and bad. But I get the feeling, from what you and Mata and the other Envoys say, that it's actually something more than that. But the Envoys say that they can't define it any better. That it's just something you feel. I can't believe that."

"Hmm. Well, in a sense, they're right," Ted said. "And I'm not sure I can define it much better, but I'll try, anyway. Let's back up to the difference between Envoys and the soul of a human. Envoys are white. They can't do anything wrong because of the way the rules work around them. They can't kill. Well, actually, they can but only under a few very closely defined terms. And they boil down to situations where all of Home and all of the Envoys would be at risk. Like that thing that was in Tex."

"And they don't judge," he went on. "which is actually an erroneous statement. They'd have to be able to make some judgment to be able to distinguish a situation where they would have to kill. But another rule they have is to protect. And that's where the first situation comes in. They will kill in order to protect on a large scale: All of Home or All of the Envoys, or both. They are protectors. No, what Envoys can't do is judge the value of a human being. Or even, maybe, of other Envoys. So now we have value as a factor. But again, it's a very narrowly defined version of value. The value of a person is that person's propensity to do good or bad, and that person's willingness to accept that they did bad and attempt to rectify it."

"And that's what the soul does. It shows up as anything from white, through any shade of gray all the way to black. Black is the inability to see that the person has done something bad and the unwillingness to attempt to correct it," Ted said. "Humans have gray souls of one shade or another because they have the capability to kill for reasons other than just protection. Oh, and other things, too. Basically, to cause harm to another person for no better reason than that they want to. How much gray indicates how willing that human is to attempt to correct a wrong, to correct a point at which they had been bad. Some people feel that things they do aren't bad, therefore need no correction, even when others explain that they ARE bad. And their shade of gray is very close to, if not actually, black. Others are so concerned with not doing bad that they actually do bad as a result of it. They aren't trying to do good or correct bad things. They're only concerned with not doing bad. And they can be led down bad paths thinking that it's for a good purpose."

"So, the balance is actually a measure of how well a person can judge when he or she does bad, does harm to another. And harm can take many forms. It can be physical, like a bully hitting a younger, smaller kid. It can be mental, like convincing someone that they are of little worth, little value to the world, and therefore must accept some lowly position. Or it can actually be spiritual, but without the religious connotations. You remember that second group of religious nuts that came to Enclave and tried to make you feel guilty for not following their

edicts. That was a form of spiritual bullying – an attempt to reduce your spiritual force, your will to live as you chose and make your own decisions. They erred with you because you already knew that you were the only judge you had. And the measure you used to judge by was much simpler than their complex body of 'law'."

"That's balance," Ted continued. "The ability to make a judgment and the willingness to correct it if it proves to be wrong or bad. You did this, instinctively, as the 'mother' to your friends. You attempted to smooth the way between them, keep them together and not lashing out at each other due to stress and frustration. And when you made mistakes, you owned up to them and tried to correct them to the best of your ability."

"The balance doesn't measure how well you achieve a correction. Only that you tried to the best of your ability," he said. "And there's another side to it, and where I had trouble. It's the ability to see when something ISN'T your fault, not something you did that was bad or wrong that you didn't acknowledge and try to correct, but something someone else did and made you feel that it was your fault. I won't get into the details. Bart knows, and he was the one that showed me the error in my judgment and allowed me to correct it. And allowed me to get my fifth stripe."

"But that's why Humans are gray. Humans CAN judge between good and bad. And Humans can try to correct it when they've done something bad. Does that make any sense to you?"

"I think so," Muriel said. "Though I think you confused a word with another one partway through it. In one case you said 'judgment' where I think you meant 'decision'. 'The ability to make a judgment and the willingness to correct it if it proves to be wrong or bad.' But that would be a decision, not a judgment, wouldn't it?"

"WOOF! OK, yes and no. Yes, it is a decision. But it is also a judgment. You make a decision based on a judgment of whether something is the best thing to do at the time. And now I see why the Envoys won't define Balance. Words are tricky, and this gets to some of the most basic thought that there is. I guess I'd have to say that a decision is the act of coming to a judgment concerning an action. Or something like that."

"Oh. OH! Like my decision to go to school that first day after training and not take action against the bullies, but just not let them take action against me. It was a defense that was an attack that was a defense. And now I'm confusing myself. But I think you see what I mean. By NOT attacking in return, I showed that their behavior was wrong, bad, and an attempt to be harmful. And by not allowing them to harm me I was protecting others. I remained the target. Then by enclosing them in shields so they were contained and could do no harm I achieved my goal of my own protection and that of my friends without harming them."

"Yep. And you did it instinctively. You weren't out to harm anyone, just stop them. That was your balance in action," Ted assured her. "There's another way that the balance works in you. You treat everyone the same, at least when you get to know them. And you find ways to work around problems and help them achieve their goals. You did this with Don

in getting him to link. And in admitting that you were wrong to flatly refuse to let him train Tex at first, and look what a success story that was. Or Fran when she came back and felt that she'd done the wrong thing in 'letting' herself be captured. Even though she actually got out of it on her own. You built them both up. One by trusting him to try. The other by showing her that she'd done the right things under very trying circumstances, and did them in such a way as to show you, me, and the Envoys a new way of doing things and abilities we didn't know we had."

"You built both of them up. And whether you've seen it, yourself, or not, you built up the other kids' opinion of themselves in the process. And as a result you built you up in their minds as the one to turn to for help, yet knowing that you aren't always right, but always try," Ted went on. "You don't think of yourself as the greatest, or better than anyone. You just get in and do a job. Or at least try to. That's what makes you you, and what gives you the balance you have. And what you're subconsciously teaching them to do. Oh, and in the process, teaching the Envoys to do. They watch you, you know. They want to know what you're going to do next, and how you're going to do it."

"Whew! That's scary. You're saying that I'm their role model. And that if I mess up then they could get things wrong," Muriel said.

"Again, yes and no. Yes, you're their role model. But they don't expect perfection out of you, because they see you make mistakes and try to correct them. So, when you mess up they're more apt to come to you, who never sets yourself above them, and say, 'I think this is wrong and here's why.' You're human and they know it. You're young, and still trying to figure out what being human means, and they know that, too. And so they are trying to figure out what being human means. Even your goofing and bantering. They know why you do it, and they know why THEY do it. You set up an unspoken rule with them. Don't hurt others. And they follow it because they see that it serves a greater purpose of relieving tensions and bonding the group."

"Well, enough philosophy," Ted said. "I've got a problem I want you to think about. One I've been thinking about for a while, now, and haven't come to any useful conclusions. We've worked within the country, trying to show them what we can do and how it can help people. Can it work outside this country? Or is it something that only America and maybe Canada can do."

"Define 'work'," said Muriel.

"Is there something we can do to help the people in other countries. For the most part the countries that really need it won't let us in to train people. In fact, many of the people in those countries won't accept that training or won't even be able to take it."

"Oh. I'll need to think about it. Especially in light of the lecture you just gave me," Muriel said, and grinned.

"Now wait a minute . . .," Ted began.

"Nope. Not gonna wait. The lecture was good, and was answering what I asked," she said. "But it kinda defines where we go in the future. Sorry, but you set yourself up for that one. I need to think about that lecture, and I need to think about your request. And I think they're connected. I HAVE to act in a certain way to maintain balance because the balance will try to make me act that way. So, how can I achieve the goal and still remain balanced. Confused yet?"

"Um"

"Well, join the club. But I'll figure it out. Or at least enough to talk about it. So, let me think," Muriel said. "Actually, your request has a hidden 'gotcha' in it. Do we have the right to tell another culture how to behave."

"Ouch! Yea, that is a factor. And it's one that people have argued about for a long time," Ted said.

"Yes. If the culture is harming the population then we have the right to intervene and tell them that they are wrong. Or show them," Muriel said.

"That was quick."

"That's the only answer possible, both from my balance and from your lecture," Muriel said. "There IS right and wrong. There is also gray where it might be right for some people and not right for others. But . . . that kind of 'wrong' is something that the people agree to do with each other, not something forced on them."

"You're poking holes in my argument."

"Of course. That's what girls are for, is to show guys where they're wrong," she tossed back. "It's part of our culture."

Once again Mata explosively ejected a grape and berry combination toward her computer screen. "Muriel," she said, "I DO wish that you would give some sort of warning before you pull one of those. Otherwise, I'm going to be forced to remain thirsty for the rest of my short life for fear of you pulling another one just as I'm taking a drink."

And across the casual area from Muriel, Ted was trying valiantly and unsuccessfully to keep from laughing. Mata just glared at him. Finally, Mata said to him, "YOU did this, you mongrel offspring of a wish and a temper. YOU wanted her trained and put in charge of training. And YOU MADE me be her Security Chief."

"Yes, Mata," Ted said, smiling. "And you do it so well. Why, even Bart agrees that there's no one better suited to having to deal with her than you."

"Itch powder in your shorts," Mata replied. "Grubs in your oatmeal. Feathers in your ears at night. I WILL pay you back for that. Just as soon as I figure out what you said."

By now, Ted was so convulsed with laughter that he was holding his stomach and curling up in the chair. Mata continued to glare at him for a minute, then started to snicker, then laugh. And this only set Ted off worse. He was actually laughing so hard he was crying. And Muriel just sat there and watched with a grin on her face. After a moment, she got up and went to the pop machines in the corner of the kitchen.

“So, who won?” Don asked.

“I did, of course,” Muriel replied with a sparkle in her eye, and Don just grinned.

Muriel moved back to the front of the room and was passing Mata's desk when Mata managed to sputter out, “Sometimes I wish you would grow up, Muriel.”

Muriel turned back toward Mata and quietly said, “Mata, put down your drink and move away from the desk.” Mata did, puzzled, and Muriel changed. Instead of the plain looking twelve year old in a gray uniform there was a stunning, blond creature of eighteen. Her hair was drawn back, gathered then swept back forward like a fan over her head. Makeup hid her freckles and accentuated her blue eyes. Her dress was an elegant black, but flecked through with varying sized white flecks in no discernible pattern, with no shoulders and ending at ankle height. It was tight through the bodice and full in the skirt. And she was wearing quietly elegant black high healed shoes. Unfortunately, she completed the change just as a man, a human man, came through the door.

“I don't know who you are,” the man said, “but I'll make you rich beyond your wildest dreams if you'll marry me.” It was a GOOD thing that Mata wasn't drinking. And Ted had so much trouble, laughing, that Muriel had to translate him to his office to calm down.

“Sir, I'm afraid that isn't possible,” she said, changing back. “I'm only twelve. It'll be some years before I even remotely resemble that. My name is Muriel. What can I do for you?” She motioned for him to take a seat across the desk from her chair.

“My name is Morton Phelps, and I'm from State.” Muriel froze, then drew herself up and turned to face him.

“Mr. Phelps, I think you'll understand that I'm somewhat less than pleased to hear you say that, considering the treatment I've received from the previous Secretary of State. I think you should probably state your purpose, and it better be good. Otherwise, you could find yourself outside the gates wondering what happened.”

“Madam Ambassador, I assure you that I had no part in it. My purpose, here, is to see if we could contract for your help. One of our Embassies has been surrounded and cut off from all utilities. They managed to get a phone call out before the government forces jammed all telephone communication. Their forces are starting to try to break in. Over a hundred people are in that building. They intend to kill them all, after some sort of torture.”

“Sit,” Muriel said, and continued to her chair. “First, it is highly irregular for this Embassy to be contacted concerning something that is so apparently a purely national affair.

Second, you DO realize that you are attempting to negotiate something outside the Treaty with a twelve year old girl, don't you? And third, it appears that you are asking us to take on and subdue an armed force of a foreign nation and rescue your people. Such an action would label us, in the minds of the other nations, as being in league with if not in support of this country. Do you understand the gravity of such a request?"

"Yes, ma'am. The President is currently working with congress to re-write the treaty to allow such an action on your part – a rescue mission, if you will, regardless of the nation requesting such rescue – and with no taint accruing to you for doing so, and no indication that such an act would mean your alliance with the government requesting it."

An incredulous voice in the back of her head shouted, ::WHAT! HURRAY! Don't let him get away. Pin him down.:: And Ted walked into the room and took the other chair in front of Muriel's desk.

"Mr. Phelps, may I introduce Ted, Ambassador for Home and Leader of the nation known as Home and it's people. Now . . . I hope you understand that we cannot legitimately act without the written assurance of the government of this country that we are acting solely as a rescue mission, and not as part of the government in an attack on a foreign nation. Until we have that in writing and signed by the members of Congress and the President, we are powerless to help."

"Ms. Muriel, may I make a phone call?"

"Of course. Would you prefer privacy?"

"Oh, no. That shouldn't be necessary."

As Mr. Phelps made the call, Ted mentally sent to Muriel, ::Are you going to accept?::

::Maybe. It depends on the paperwork and how fast they can move. If we act without the clearance, then we've turned ourselves into the aggressor. Even if all we do is rescue the people. But you know as well as I do that an Embassy like that will have secret material that they'll want us to save, too. When I know where it is I can stop the assault, the same way I stopped the bullies. But we don't even know that, yet. All we can do is wait.::

"He says it's signed. It's on his desk. But I don't see how"

"Mr. Phelps," Muriel said, retrieving the document, "we don't fool around, here." Muriel read it, then passed it to Ted. From Ted it went to Bart, and then to Mata.

"It's solid," Ted said.

"Kids!" Muriel shouted. "In the street. Ted, I need a visual."

"What are you planning to do?"

“Rescue the people. In the most shameful way that that culture ever experienced. I want one squad as observers. ONLY observers. I want a record of what we do, and I want it out on the media as soon as the hostages are freed and back in this country.”

“Then that lets out your squads,” Bart said. “I’m not even sure Ted’s will do it. You’re talking about taking kids into a war zone.”

“Bart, these kids have teeth, and they know how to bite. Ted, how fast can I learn another language?”

“Do it as a mental shout. They’ll receive it in their own language. Thoughts CAN be words, but more often what comes across is actually just ideas. I thought you knew that!”

“I do, now.” Muriel paused. “They’ve got people on the roof. Hold on.” She closed her eyes and concentrated, then opened them and smiled, grimly. “They aren’t on the roof now. And there’s a shield on the building that they can’t break through. I’m pushing it outward into a bubble. There, that should give the kids room. We’ll be back in a bit. I’ll have the kids bring them to the street.”

“We’ll have someone to receive them and take care of them,” Bart said. Ted just looked at him with his mouth open. Bart was taking unspoken orders from Muriel.

Muriel walked out to the kids, who gave her immediate attention, She apparently explained mentally what she wanted and what she was going to do. They all nodded, then disappeared.

Chapter 2

Dogs Bite (Still Tuesday)

Muriel had already given her 'troops' their orders as to what she wanted done. Then she put Don in charge and let them do it their way. The only exception was the landing zone. She wanted it obvious to those trying to break in that it was children that were taking charge.

They landed in front of the Embassy. Her shields had been busy while she organized the kids, and all the assailants were gathered in front of the building. As the kids moved to the front door and blew it open with their shields, Muriel started sending out forced mental commands.

::You in the Embassy. This is Muriel, Ambassador for the People of Home to the People of Earth. We are here to take you back to your country. Gather what you can and get out of the front of the building, NOW! The building will be destroyed when we leave, along with anything left in it. The kids will direct you where to stand so we can transport all of you at once,:: she sent.

Then she turned and walked through the shields, toward the assailants. ::My name is Muriel and I'm the Ambassador from Home to the people of earth. You, on the other hand, you are shameful creatures. You do not even warrant the label of people. You are no better than a pack of rabid dogs, feeding on your own insanity. You are filth. You are vermin. You are unspeakable. Leave. Now.:: And a shot rang out. Followed by another and another.

::You have just made war on a representative of and Citizen of Home. You apparently think that, because we are unarmed children, that we can't or won't fight back. That is a mistake. Unlike you, we know what we are fighting for. You would harm not only us and the people of this Embassy, but your own people. We are protectors. But we are not restricted in how we go about protecting.::

A sudden scream went up from the assembled mob. ::None of you will have offspring, now. Or at least no further offspring.:: A second mass scream occurred. ::And none of you will ever again wield a weapon. You are outcast. If there are any of the population of this country who will offer you aid, that is their business. But without it you will not eat. You will not take care of the most basic of functions, or clothe yourselves or work at any occupation. And soon, no doubt, you will face your final judgment. Alone, afraid, and knowing that you have done wrong to these people we are transporting out and to your own people. You have shamed yourselves. You have shamed your people and your country in front of the whole world.::

She gave the word to Don, and the massed kids took the frightened people from the Embassy back to the street in front of Muriel's office. And then, she had the grim satisfaction of emulating her first mentor. The building crumbled to dust, which reduced to molecules then

atoms, then subatomic particles and dispersed. Nothing of the building remained except the hole where the basement had been. And then she rendered the Embassy grounds lifeless. And left.

She and the one observation squad landed inside her office. Outside was bedlam. Mata took the disc with the recording of the events, and shortly there was a stack of discs on her desk. The squad members grabbed, and took off, each for a different media office, local as well as national. In minutes the television behind Muriel's desk, the large one for the break-room, was announcing breaking news.

Ted came over to her, and quietly said, "You know you gave them a death sentence. And not a pretty one. They'll either die at the hands of their own people, which will at least be quick, or die of starvation."

"Yes, I know. That's there culture talking. No hands. No way to eat, and no way to take care of normal bodily functions. What they intended for the Embassy workers was worse. Believe me. Especially the women." She sighed. "And now I need to take care of another matter."

"What?" asked Ted.

"We were lied to. The Ambassador and top aids and department heads were evacuated before any of this went down. The government left those people to die, then called on us to save them if we could. So, I'm going to fight back. Again. Warn the President that his time in office may be at an end. I intend to make public what I found when we got there."

"I doubt the President knew," Ted said.

"I know. His watch, his responsibility. I'll give him time to come up with something, even if it's just that he'd been played a fool by someone that wanted a war. Someone in this country, who was willing to sacrifice hundreds of people. Speaking of which, how are they?"

"They're starting to calm down," Ted said. "Mark was the one that twigged on what you were going to do. He had Envoys in here from all over. Portable toilets set up, chairs and tables set with various foods and drink. He took over from Don, after praising him all over the place for his neat placement of them and the rescue, itself. And praising all the kids. They're walking tall. So, how much time do I have to warn the President?"

"If the media haven't arrived in an hour, then I'll call them in," Muriel said.

"You look tired."

"More disgusted. Most of that mob were soldiers. Not in uniform, but unmistakable. The rest were dupes. They'd been sucked in by propaganda and put on an emotional high by the leaders. Oh, the leaders didn't escape. I had the mob englobed before they could get away. Their propaganda department is going to need some new sacrificial goats."

"Ted, phone," Bart said. Ted went to his office and took the call. Shortly, Muriel saw him disappear out of the corner of her eye. However, she figured that he knew what he was doing, and she could already see trouble coming.

She turned to Mark and asked if the Embassy workers would be willing to be on camera. By now, they had settled down, and food and care had gone a long way to raising their spirits. He assured her that physically and mentally they were ready.

When Muriel turned back the media was there waiting for her, being held back by adult and very serious looking Envoys. As she walked toward them, reporters began shouting questions.

"Is it true that you broke the treaty?" "Did you kill all those people?" "Why did you send kids into a dangerous situation?" "Why did you destroy a valuable building?"

"Quiet, please." Though Muriel spoke quietly, her voice seemed to override the mass of shouted questions. A stunned silence ensued.

"A few minutes ago," Muriel said, "at the request of the United States government under an exception to the Treaty signed by the President, an action was taken to rescue the Embassy workers you see behind me. The action was in no way a support of this country or the government. It was solely a rescue mission – an attempt to protect those who needed protection, and in line with the basic principles of Enclave and the Envoys. Obviously, those people were rescued. The children, my friends, that effected the rescue are all alive, well, and were never in any danger. They have all been trained in the Envoy techniques that allowed them to do what was needed at the time."

"Let me repeat that another way," she continued. "The action taken to rescue the Embassy workers was conducted entirely of children twelve years of age. Each of them, in addition to being citizens of this country, are also Citizens of Home and cherished as such. They did a difficult job, and made it look routine. They are proud of what they did. I am proud of what they did. And the Envoys of Home are proud of them."

"I also want you to note that ONLY the Embassy workers were rescued. The Ambassador and other top people had already been evacuated before the aggression started against the Embassy. The Embassy workers had been left to be killed by the mob, thus justifying a war between the United States and that country. That war will not, now, take place."

"While I was there I was fired upon. I had identified myself as an Ambassador of Home. Then they fired on me. As a result of that act of war I took action to see that those people, and only those people, would never try to make war on Home again. Their ability to reproduce has been destroyed. Likewise their ability to bear arms against Home or it's Citizens. When I left they were alive. How long they remain so and the manner of their death is up to the people of that country. It should be noted, though, that most of the people in that mob were soldiers in civilian clothes." Muriel lowered her head and shook it, as if in disbelief.

"Also, at the request of the United States government, the building was destroyed in such a way as to render any possible files or equipment of a classified nature unable to be found, reproduced, or analyzed. In short, it was rendered into sub-atomic particles and allowed to disperse on the wind. As a further indication of the shame that country faces, the grounds of that Embassy have been rendered lifeless. Nothing will grow on it. Nor will any building stand on it."

"I have something to say," Ted said from behind her. "The man who attempted to instigate the war is an American citizen in a high government position. He is currently in the hands of the United States Secret Service and will remain so until his trial for treason. He was, and I do mean was, Deputy Director of Operations of the CIA. That bureau will now be disbanded and its functions taken over by the Secret Service. They've held the job in the past, and are known to be competent and honest."

"Also for your information," Ted added, "the treaty does NOT say that the people of Home work for the US government. Instead it says that any country can request our help in rescuing people in danger, and no political alignment will be presumed by our actions. The people known as Envoys, the people of Home, are protectors."

"Someone, today, attempted to let slip the dogs of war," he continued. "A pack of kids went in, muzzled them, brought out the people they would have killed, neutered the dogs, and made sure they would never run to war again. And that's the whole story. Thank you for coming." Ted and Muriel turned and went into her office.

"I blew it," Muriel said as she collapsed into her recliner.

And Ted started laughing. "No," he managed to get out. "Not hardly." He continued laughing for a bit. When he finally calmed down, he said, "First, you end a war with a bunch of kids. Then, when you're fired on you leave the people that fired on you alive and at the mercy of their own people. You come back and face the media alone and silence them with two quiet words. You answer their questions without answering their questions – simply telling the straight truth while in the background are happy, waving people that moments before were facing a gruesome death. And your voice! I've never heard anything like it, and I want you to teach me how to do it. Quiet. So quiet that the microphones shouldn't have been able to pick it up. Yet it was heard all over Enclave. And you glowed. Oh, girl, you couldn't have put on a better performance."

"You're kidding! But you had to come bail me out!"

"No, Muriel. I didn't bail you out. I simply added information that you didn't have and did it in a normal voice. No, what got them was you. Wait and see. Even the talking heads will back the spunky little girl that was the reason the riot stopped. Oh, and Phelps? He was in on it, but as a patsy, a dupe. He was being used and didn't know it. The President should be on, pretty soon. You'll see."

Muriel was in too much of a funk to actually hear the news reports when they came on. Only bits and pieces of them came through. "The President has verified that the uprising in

the country was created and fostered by the CIA without approval of Congress or the President.” “One small girl took on an armed mob and won, leaving the mob to the un-tender mercies of the general population.” “. . . total destruction of the building, leaving nothing for the government to get its hands on, and without using any known weapon or device that could create such controlled total destruction.” “In a two thirds majority vote the CIA is disbanded. For now, the functions will be carried out by the Secret Service. Homeland Security has attempted to trump the move, and was told that they will be examined next for their failure to properly oversee the actions of that department. Some have raised the question as to whether Homeland Security is actually doing it's job, or merely going through the motions for the sake of their political appointment.” “The rescue of the people, by a group of children, has shown that despite the fears and worries of some overzealous portions of the media the Envoys and those they train are very effective.”

::Mark, nothing's getting through to her. She won't eat. She won't go talk to her friends or the people her actions saved. What do I do?: Mata asked.

::Will she let you hold her? Just hold her. You're closest to her, you've been her protector, she let you deep in her mind. Just hold her and let love and compassion leak across. Acceptance. All the stuff that Caleb showed you.::

So, that's what Mata did. Just held her, accepted her, loved her. For hours. She walled off Muriel's office area, blanked the windows, and just let her presence do the work. From time to time Ted would check on them, careful not to disturb Muriel or what Mata was doing. Surprisingly, he wasn't worried. Just considerate and sending his love, along with Mata's, to Muriel. Just a warm, friendly closeness of caring. Others joined in, during the evening. Ones that should have been home in bed. Her friends. Always the same, warm, friendly caring and love.

It took most of the night. But then Muriel seemed to come out of it. “I'm sorry, Mata. I didn't mean to keep you here, cramped up like that,” she said, and she seemed to be all right.

“Don't worry about it. That's what I'm here for,” Mata replied.

“Mata, I did something wrong. Or at least I thought I did. And it bothered me that I couldn't fix it. Finally, I started actually hearing what was going on in my head, besides you and the others. Melanie's dad. Telling me about what war is like. Telling me that sometimes war is like triage in medicine. And that I was worrying about the cut finger instead of the people I could save from dying. He used other analogies, too, but that was the one that finally showed me what I did. And that what I did wrong wasn't in what I did to the mob, but in feeling bad about it afterward.”

“Then he showed me what happened in that country, afterward,” Muriel went on. “Yes, the people killed that mob. But it was quick and clean, or as clean as an execution can be. Then the people marched on the government. Their death wasn't so quick and clean. But I didn't do it or even cause it. It wasn't any part of my responsibility. They were simply fed up with what was going on. Melanie's dad said something about rulers only ruling with the consent of the ruled, and I guess they revoked that consent,” and she gave a sad laugh.

"Remember that massed group of military I told you about?" she said. "Some of them came and told me about really bad times. Times when they were ordered to do things they knew were wrong, and they did them because they were ordered to. Others told about giving such orders, and how to tell when you've gone too far. All of them said that I'd given that mob a chance, which was more than they deserved for what they had tried to do and what they had done. And it began to sink in."

"Then," Muriel said, "Melanie's dad did something I didn't know he could do. He not only showed me the people that had set it up, that Deputy Director and stuff, but showed me his mind. Not his soul, which I could see, but his mind! It was unreal. It was like the guy wasn't even human. He was the worst kind of bully, and his greed was for power. That's what he wanted the war for, was because it would give him a high ranking and high paying job with a company that made arms and ammunition. He just wanted people killed for profit."

"And that's when I finally realized that I'd done one of the best things that could have been done. There were other choices, but by using only children to make the rescue, and by taking their attack on me as an attack on Home I neutralized the possibility of this country going to war. And by dealing with them as I did I showed that any country trying to war on Home would be served in much the same way. And that's the 'killer' for men. They are much more strongly influenced to violence by their hormones than women are. And that's when I came back."

"And now," said Muriel, "I've got a lot of people to thank for their support, starting with you."

"So, now you know that you can trust your balance to guide you in a direction that won't shake it," Mata said.

"No, not really. I still need to watch what I'm doing. But, because of Melanie's dad and the others I have a much better idea of what is right and wrong in such a situation. So now I can make much better, much more conscious decisions. And I shouldn't have to go through this again," Muriel replied. "It also tells me that I can train a militia, or whatever you call it. And it puts a whole new meaning on 'troubleshooting'," she said, smiling. And it was a real smile. The girl was coming back.

"Hi, Muriel," Ted said, as he walked in. Unnoticed to Muriel, the wall Mata had put up was down. "How are you doing?"

"All straightened out," Muriel said, firmly. "I just wasn't thinking right. And thanks for your support while I was out of it. I'll go thank my friends in a minute, too. But I want to talk to you seriously, first. Oh, and you, too, Mata. And maybe Bart, if you want him in on it."

"That sounds like trouble," Ted said.

"Yes, but not for us," Muriel said. "I've figured out a possible way for the dogs of war to bite without actually going to war. It'll take some coordination and some sham or play-acting,

and it'll mean a bit of redesign of the stripes that my friends and I have, but I think that will be relatively minor. School field trips."

"Say, huh?" Ted said, intelligently.

"We go on school field trips to see how governments and their departments are run. That way we can see who the baddies are before they act. Every government and all its departments. And that brings us to why the change in the stripes. I happen to like mine. I'm proud of them and the work it took to get them. I'm proud of the fact that I was made an Ambassador, and have been able to do some effective work. But, there's a time and a place. I want to be able to 'turn them off', so to speak, when there's a chance that they might give away the game. Like if one of the baddies happens to be an Envoy renegade that we don't know about."

"Those are good points," Mata said, "and deserve some thought and discussion."

"OK, now for the whammy," Muriel said. "A children's brigade. If we keep knocking out those who are bent on war, and act on it with children, pretty soon anyone opting for war is going to sound ridiculous. We both know that my friends are protected, and we can increase that protection with a squad of Envoys and various ways we do things. Again, this is loose, so treat it as a point of discussion, but not part of the first one."

"A brigade was a large number of people," Ted put in.

"Not originally," countered Muriel. "Originally it meant about ten people. But if you don't like the term, choose your own. Regiment? Squadron? Flying Squad? Flying Column? There're all sorts of choices. The point is that they'd be the 'dogs of war'. So, when you 'cry havoc' you'd have someone to send out. Heck, we could even include illusion, where the kids turn into dog or wolf headed human children. That should scare the pants off of the superstitious."

"Hmm. That raises possibilities. But there's a number of things we need to talk about with both of them before we put either of them into action," Ted said, then changed the subject. "Have you had breakfast? And your place or mine?" Ted added, with a vaudevillian leer.

"Mine, you bad imitation of a villain," she said. Then sent, ::Chuck? Are you busy?::

::Nope,:: he responded. ::Off duty. And I'd be happy to make breakfast for you. But you should include a few others in your meeting. Me, for one. The other two off-duty squad leaders. Carl, to keep Fred apprised of what's happening so he can fit it into his analysis. Bart and Mata are already included. But not your friends, just yet. Let's percolate this a bit, first.::

::You were listening in!:: Muriel accused.

::Of course. It's our job to protect you. Even from yourself,:: he grinned back.

“Sheesh! A girl can't have ANY secrets!” Muriel said and sent. Then she disappeared to her apartment.

Chapter 3

Plots and Subterfuges (Wednesday morning)

They assembled around Muriel's table, Ted once again refusing to take her place at the head. There was one addition to the council of war: Don. He got in as being the resident expert on how the civilian stripes worked, despite the fact that it was Ted and Muriel that had actually thought of them with Nancy's help. Chuck had brought help – two squad Envoys to serve, and to fill in under Chuck's supervision for seconds or any requests, so he took a seat at the table when the rest arrived.

First on the agenda was getting the parent's permissions for the field trips, and the necessary documentation for traveling to other countries. Since that had already been done for Muriel's friends, setting up the same sort of thing for non-trained 'students' of the Enclave school system wasn't a real problem. There had been numerous requests for Enclave to take over teaching individual children after word had leaked out about the 'testing' fiasco of the city school system. So far, none had been signed up. Ted suggested that a blanket approval become a part of the paperwork that parents would have to sign in enrolling their children in the Enclave school. Ted had also felt out the Envoys that had made the initial dumps to Muriel to find out how long it would take to develop such curricula for grades five through twelve, and college level of Associates and Bachelor degrees. They replied that the curricula for five through twelve were already done. College level was being worked on, but would take some time due to the many disciplines involved and the accreditation necessary to provide the degree courses.

Then it was Don's turn. And his reply was simple. Illusion. It was already built into the stripes that Melanie and Tex had. Muriel and her friends' stripes were permanent to the individual because, at the time they were awarded, no one thought about the possibility of having them on 'civilian' clothes. Additional tricks, such as making them glow, had been added after the fact, but they were essentially still the same permanent stripes. However, Melanie and Tex had required a change to all that. Ted and Muriel and Nancy, one of Melanie's trainers, had come up with an adaptive illusion that could be programmed for various situations.

It was originally felt that Envoys and those trained should be able to see the illusion stripes as a way of identifying other trained people at a glance. And experience had shown that it worked. Service personnel at the Enclave Guest House had recognized that Melanie had passed her tests and become a Citizen of Home based on the stripes on her sleeves, and congratulated her because of it. But now it could be seen that there might be times when people would want to hide them from Envoys and trained people, and one of those times was covert operations, like the suggested field trips. Don suggested the reprogramming and that it could be applied to Ted, Muriel and her friends to activate when they weren't wearing uniforms. He also volunteered to apply the illusion and explain it to her friends. He also said that the illusion could be turned off, turned on for only select Envoys or trained personnel,

turned on selectively for others, or turned on for everyone. Thus allowing individuals to select who was allowed to see them and under what circumstances. It was approved, and Don left to apply them to Muriel's friends. He was back before his scrambled eggs and bacon had a chance to cool. He'd simply dumped the changes on the kids through their envoys, all at once.

The discussion had moved to the advisability of using children in a combat zone. Muriel maintained that there would be no risk to kids that were already trained for two reasons. The first was their shields and those of their Envoy guards, and a covering shield by a Security Squad. The second reason was because it was her intention to go in BEFORE it became an active combat zone. Creating a shield barrier and disarming the aggressors before they could 'aggress'. In many cases it would be like the rescue of the Embassy personnel, a real protection racket but without the need for payment.

Muriel's arguments were being countered on the basis of the look of sending children into war. Parents would scream over the possibility of little Johnny being killed in a war, and people would say that children didn't have the ability to make an intelligent choice to go to war.

Muriel countered that with the fact that, in any war, children were involved as innocent bystanders that were being injured and killed with no way to defend themselves. Envoy trained children COULD defend themselves, and better than trained soldiers. And children understood that fighting back, when they could, was better than knuckling under to such abuse. And parents could be shown that such training provided them with the defense and protection that they needed. And that's what Home and the Envoys were all about: Protection. And children were quite capable of making rational decisions when allowed to.

Then, she started hitting below the belt with her argument, noting that she'd had rocks thrown at her, been shot at, and even been the target of an RPG and five missiles. If she hadn't been willing to fight back, and had the training to do so, she'd have been dead my now. And that it was her friends that stopped and held the missiles because of their training. And that it was kids, her friends, that already felt they were on the front line. Also, that she would do it, herself and alone, if necessary. But that it would be done. The impact on warring countries of being stopped cold by kids would be the ultimate deterrent – shame. Better than the concept of having adults do it, which might actually antagonize people into trying to defeat Envoys and trained human adults. And much better than the escalation of 'bigger and better' ways of killing people had ever been. At that point Ted said that he'd try to find a way, which was as close to a capitulation as Muriel was apt to get.

So, then they went on to naming, and the idea of creating illusions to be more frightening. Don asked a few questions about whether they would be a mask, or a true illusion, and Muriel mentioned that she would want to be able to see through it rather than have restricted vision. It was decided that, if they went that way, then the children's heads should look like wolf rather than dog – dog, or actually jackal but looked like dog to those outside the region, having been used in the religion of Egypt in centuries past. All except for one. Muriel, it was felt, should be something different, something that would stand out and be remembered, rather than just one of the pack. Ideas were kicked around, but ultimately it was

decided that her illusion head should be that of a black panther.

“So, how difficult would this be to do?” Muriel asked Don.

“Oh, real easy. As easy as making clothes,” he replied.

“Yes, but you can't see through clothes,” Muriel said.

“You do know,” Don said, “that under your clothes you're naked.”

“DON!” Muriel hollered and blushed bright red.

Don finally cracked a smile, and Ted roared with laughter. The Envoys just looked puzzled. Of course people were naked under their clothes. That was obvious.

Finally, Muriel caught on to what Don had said and realized that she'd been had. She catapulted a roll at him, which described the most interesting curve and returned to her with even more force. “You cad,” she said. “You've been waiting a long time to pull that on me, haven't you.”

“Well, actually, no,” Don replied. “But it would have been worth the wait,” he said, grinning. “I don't think I've ever seen anyone blush like that. Certainly not you, who's always so composed and takes everything in stride. That was SO worth it.”

“Muriel, give up,” Ted chuckled. “People are starting to understand how you work and are tailoring the jabs to suit you. That's three times you've been hit with stoppers. I'm just glad I was here to see it. That was beautiful.”

“Men!” Muriel said, and glared at them. Then, suddenly they were faced with the impassive face of a panther staring at them from blazing, yellow eyes . . . and licking it's lips, slowly. She even added paws with slowly extended claws. The laughter that met that was even greater than before. “You're right,” she added, returning to her normal look and grinning, “this is MUCH better than a wolf head.”

Chuck chuckled. “That's even better than the >SCORPIONS< sign you put up the other day. Our queen pussy cat has teeth. And claws.” This was met by dead silence around the table. “Oops, sorry. I didn't mean that to imply a ruler,” he said. “Honest!” And Muriel smiled. And so did Mata.

::She's back,:: Mata sent to Ted. ::She's OK::

“That suggests something to me. How to target the ones that are advocating the violence. When Don popped that one at me, he was striking at a weakness I have. What are the weaknesses of rulers and terrorists, and how can we strike at them?” Muriel asked.

“Good question,” Ted replied. “I don't have a good answer. But I'll see if we can find out.”

::You're right, Mata,:: Ted sent. ::And maybe better than ever. She wouldn't have thought to use her own weakness as an example, at least not that soon after it had bit her, before. That's a very good sign. And I think I see where she's going with the Children's Brigade. She's using bullies tactics against bullies. She's using humiliation and shame. Guilt. Public pressure. And without using lethal force. She lets THEM use the lethal force and find it ineffective, and just stops them. That's cold. That's the worst form of cruel. It's the sort of thing a mother does to an errant child. 'You've been bad. Go stand in the corner.' Nasty::

::But well within the balance, and in line with being a protector,:: Mata returned. ::And she showed it with both Clyde and Fred, and we didn't really realize it!::

::Ever hear of Boudicca? A queen in ancient Britain that dared to challenge the Roman Empire after the death of her husband and king. She was flogged and her daughters abused, and she responded by raising an army attempting to throw the Romans out. Her name may have something to do with the word 'bodacious', which is said to be a combination of bold and audacious. And, say this quietly, our little queen is definitely bold and audacious. However, I don't like the way the story of Boudicca turns out::

::I know what you mean,:: Mata sent back. ::But Muriel has more resources to draw on than Boudicca did, because of the training. She also has protections that that old queen didn't have::

"Well," Muriel said, "I think we have enough to think about and find out information about to start with. Why don't we break this up for now, and come back to it when we have more information?" As they started translating out, Muriel said, "Ted, I'd like you to stay for a bit."

This, of course, disturbed him. Had they pushed her too hard? Too fast? Were some of the things she'd had to do been too offensive for her? Certainly, some of the things were way beyond what one should expect of a twelve year old girl. But he wasn't aware of having pushed her into anything but the training, itself. And she had seemed happy. Mata hadn't said anything, and he KNEW that she was deep into her prodigy's mind. He didn't have long to wait.

As soon as the last had left the apartment, Muriel said, "Look, I know you created your body after you died. I also know that you made some improvements in it when you did. Is there any way to do the same with a still existing body?"

"Um . . . actually, on a small scale, it's already being done," Ted said "Whenever Mark works on someone he tries to make some minor improvements. Things to make them feel better. To make them healthier. Less susceptible to disease. That's what he did with your parents, really. Nothing major beyond repair and boosting their strength. The major things, like improving heart, lungs, digestion, reproduction, and so forth, he's looking into. But we want to make sure that we don't make mistakes along the way. Why?"

"Then maybe I should talk to him . . . see if he's considered some things that I see as a potential problem and would like to see solved. Girls . . . and women . . . are constantly at risk. Men can overpower us. Seriously hurt us. And most men don't even realize they're doing it. Oh, I'm not talking about physically, necessarily, though there's that, too. It's just . . . girls seem to be wired to blame themselves when something bad happens to them, and men seem wired to take advantage of that and make or help them feel worse. Some girls are like this right from the beginning. I've looked at a few that didn't seem to have this whatever it is. And I've looked at a few that do. There seems to be a chemical that's lacking in the ones that feel down about themselves."

"These girls," Ted said, "is one of them you?"

"What? Oh! No," Muriel said. "Well, sometimes, but it passes, usually. Last night was like that. By the way, thanks again for your support. It helped. No, the ones I'm talking about are that way all the time. Both ways. Mine is only temporary. Last night was the worst, but I brought that on myself."

"OK, I think Mark might be the best to ask about this. He may know something that could help. I was worried that you . . ."

"No, nothing like that" Muriel said. "Last night was my fault. I wanted to believe that I'd done the right thing. But some of the questions, yesterday, had me doubting myself, and I ended up going into a downward spiral. The support of you and my friends, and talking with some of the ones that were in that massed military display – I've GOT to know how they did that – turned that around. They were the kindest people I've ever known, other than my parents, and some of them had died long before I was even born. Oh, gad! I've got to get downstairs. I've got to thank the kids for their support!"

"Um, I think you should hold off on that. Apparently, even though they were at their homes, they were up all night with you. Their Envoys have them in an enforced sleep. They should wake up in a couple of hours feeling like they've had a solid eight hours," Ted said. "And no, you shouldn't feel responsible for that. It was their choice. I don't know if you know it, but you've done a lot for them. And this was a time they could pay some of it back by helping you. So, yes, thank them. But give them time to get their rest, first. And accept when they say something like, 'oh, it was nothing.' OK?"

"Well, if you say so. I feel guilty that they lost sleep over me."

"You shouldn't. If anything, they feel they owe you. You've trained them, given them confidence in themselves, or at least more than they had. Nursed them through some tough times and shown them that they are capable beyond what they thought they were. Don's a good example of that. And Fran's a second one. Same with what you've done with the outside trainees that have gone through the training under you, in one way or another. Even your parents," Ted said. "Their security chief, Fran, got the information on how to train them from Mata, who had watched you VERY carefully as you worked, and knew how you did it. This has expanded far faster than I thought it would. And all because of you and your mothering everyone and finding new ways of doing things. You've even had an effect, a

major one, on Envoys in general and yours specifically. So don't feel guilty that people chose to lose a little sleep to give back to you the love and caring that you gave them."

"As for your ideas of how to stop the aggression, I think you're right. I just have to figure out how to implement it. And I've got a team working on that right now. We'll come up with something," he added. "So relax a bit, now, and let's see what happens. In fact, if you don't mind, there's something I'd like you to look into. When I came up with this uniform it was meant for only one purpose: utility. About equivalent to what someone would wear to do dirty work like a mechanic or mucking out stables. It was never designed to be a dress uniform. I want you to think about what would work for other situations. Both for men and women, and even you and your very capable friends. Oh, and they don't have to be uniform 'uniforms'. Think of what Tex did, and I approved. So think about it. Kick it around with your friends. Talk to your parents and any other adults you can think of. No hurry. Just get back to me when you have some ideas. OK?"

"Yep. I can do that. In fact, I have been having that idea in the back of my mind, and have been looking at various styles. I'll just expand it, some," Muriel replied, looking more like she had a purpose. "Does it have to be gray?"

"Not necessarily. I chose gray because of the way I felt at the time, and because it was fairly easy to clean. I didn't know at the time that what we wore wouldn't need cleaning." And he gave an ironic grin.

Chapter 4

Fashions and Fun

(Wednesday afternoon)

::Darn! I thought this was going to be easy. Just look up what formal wear looked like then make modifications to suit us. Pfft! Really, Mata, have you SEEN what people call 'formal wear'? It's ridiculous. What men wear as suits is bad enough and shows absolutely no imagination. And Tuxedo's are nothing more than a slightly fancier version of them, and so old in style that I doubt that most men even realize their origins. And women. Even worse. Stupid, over candied confections that are expensive, difficult to get in and out of, and impossible to move properly in. I'm going to have to design something from scratch, and I've never designed clothes.::

::What about uniforms?:: Mata asked.

::Worse. Most of what I saw are variations on civilian formal wear, and they expect women to wear something very like it but with a tight, knee-length skirt or a full skirt that a woman can trip over.. No wonder I opted for jeans and a T-shirt most of the time. And why I took so quickly to the current uniform. At least it was functional and distinctive.::

::OK, how about something out of science fiction movies and TV programs. After all, we're supposed to be something 'out of this world'. And don't EVEN think of robes and wings! SHEESH! I could see that thought forming in you mind even before I finished saying 'science fiction'.::

::Well, at least they tried. But most of them were so tied to either the current civilian styles or simply fancied up the utility uniforms used in the movie or program that it was pathetic. It's as if clothing designers had imagination surgically removed during their schooling. Actually, seeing what was going on in the school I was in, maybe they did. They certainly didn't want anyone to learn how to think. The closest thing I saw to something imaginative as well as functional was for men and specific to a particular country. And I just can't see the boys among my friends wearing kilts.::

Mata laughed. ::Yea, I hear you. They'd think you were trying to turn them into imitation girls, despite the fact that the Scots were some of the toughest fighters in the world for their time. OK, kilts are out. But we might be able to work on something from that source. But what to do about the girls. And it doesn't say ANYTHING about the adults.::

::Maybe it does. If we can come up with something that looks decent on kids, why not scale the idea up for adults. Usually, from what I've seen, it's done the other way around, with the adult costumes designed and the kids versions imitate it. So, we think plain instead of fancy. Fancy doesn't work well on kids. It's meant to make them look cute, but just makes them look ridiculous. But plain would work on adults. And do we want it to really be a uniform? Or more individualized?::

::Hmm,:: Muriel began answering herself. ::For formal, a uniform I think. For everyday wear, why not individualized. Tex modified the uniform to something distinctive to the police. Melanie opted to stay with standard 'business' style clothing. And Sally and my parents definitely went with ordinary clothes. There's no reason I can think of why my friends can't choose to individualize what they wear. Except, maybe, when they're acting in an official capacity. Tex and Melanie had outside official activities, so opted to either stay with what was normal to them or distinctive but still obviously a uniform, but not ours. But for formal wear when they're representing Home they should be in some form of uniform. We can work out some variety, but it should have enough common characteristics to show that the person is representing Home and not some other organization.::

::Sounds like what we need are a couple of victims . . . er . . . uh . . . volunteers to model clothes for us.:: Mata sent. ::How about Carla and Tommy?::

::Uh, huh. Volunteers, huh?:: Muriel sent an image of an ironic smile on her face. ::Sounds kinda like 'I want two volunteers – you and you'. Wouldn't it be better to ask, first?::

::Well, actually, I did. And they agreed. I only asked you to see if you agreed with using them,:: Mata replied, sending back an image of her sticking out her tongue.

Within moments the two clothing dummies and Mata arrived in Muriel's apartment, and she explained what she was trying to do. Unlike most clothing designers Muriel felt that they did two things wrong. First was in designing for an adult, then trying to downsize for children of whatever age. And the second was in blindly accepting the standards of the nineteenth century for men. That archaic costume, which bled over into the standard business suit, had long outlived its usefulness in her opinion. Attempts had been made, in the past, to supplant it. However, the Nehru jacket or coat just didn't work out. So, now it was her turn.

“And,” Muriel said, “Since normal American formal wear is based on that awful looking nineteenth century complex costume that I don't like, I figured I'd play tit-for-tat. Let's go back about two centuries earlier and start with that as a basis.” She brought up pictures from her computer onto her large screen. “These are Scottish formal wear items. No, Tommy, I'm not going to insist that you guys wear kilts. One variant is to wear what are called 'trews'. Also, we're not going to have all that silver plastered all over the jackets. We're going to take the originals as a 'rough' and smooth them out and simplify them. Also make them a little less form-fitting, so you have room to move in them. Stripes will be moved to one epaulette, probably the right one. That way if you want to wear a 'fly plaid' you would have the appropriate space on the left for it.”

Muriel looked at some of the pictures and said, “Some of these have some strange neck-wear. Again, we won't make you wear lace. There's a way to get an elegant look without it. And where exposed belts are shown you would be authorized to use the Home logo on the buckle.” Muriel sighed. “I want to step out of that nineteenth century straight-jacket and excuse for social bullying. What I'm trying to do is create our own style without it being a copy of someone else's. Trouble is, I have to start somewhere. So, we take seventeenth century Scottish and change it into something that looks formal without it looking

Scottish.”

Carla was studying the pictures and creating image illusions to one side. From time to time she'd step back and look from the screen to the images. “What color were you thinking of for the guys?” she asked, quietly.

“Well, actually, if I could get away with it,” Muriel said, “I'd make formal wear a uniform, so it would be the same color for men and women. I was thinking of something about halfway between the mid-gray of what we're wearing now and white. Only maybe not really a gray. Kinda a brownish tone to it without it looking tan. Definitely not a blue cast, though. I don't want to even suggest sky or robin's eggs.”

“Hmm. Stick to the gray, but make the fabric almost iridescent. Not flashy type of iridescent, just that shadows and highlights, as the person moves, have a hint of color. It would definitely stand out and look other-worldly.” She stepped back away from the screen, and said, “Like this.” And changed.

What she wore was loosely based on the Montrose Doublet. Buttons did not exist, and the cuffs were gauntlet style with the points going halfway to the elbow. A satin or silk three quarter inch stripe circled about two inches from the end of the cuff. The jabot neck-wear was of the same material, but with a flat, folded appearance as if a triangle of the material had been folded toward the center over and over. Definitely not lace or ruffles. Beneath it were tapered trousers with a one inch stripe down the outside seam, again of the satin or silk material in the same color as the basic uniform. Her stripes were on the left epaulette, and a fly plaid of the satin/silk material was attached on the right epaulette. The belt was also the semi-iridescent color, but looked like leather, and the silver buckle had the Home logo centered on it.

The entire effect was almost severe, until she moved. The subtle play of the iridescence made her almost glow. Definitely other-worldly. “Men,” Carla said, “or boys would wear the stripes on the right epaulette, and the optional fly plaid on the left. Oh, and the fly plaid?” she said, and walked quickly down half the length of the apartment and back, “actually flies.” And it did. Billowing out behind her like a cape or a flag unfurling.

“There are a couple of other doublets that could be used, too. Now, let's see if I can get this next right.” Carla closed her eyes for a moment, then nodded her head and the trousers became kilts in the plain light gray. The same color knee-length socks, cuffed at the top with the satin/silk material, were below them. “This is what the fly plaid was actually meant to go with, but may look too Scottish for your taste.” Then she turned and walked down the length of the apartment and back again. “Getting the sway of the kilts right is the hardest part. Part of it is the type of material and part of it is in how you move. Girls do it naturally.”

Tommy, all this time, had been watching and studying Carla, and studying the images she'd put up to the side. Suddenly, he switched and was wearing trousers under a modified Prince Charles doublet and waistcoat. No belt was in evidence. But the fly plaid was attached at his left shoulder, and his stripes were on his right epaulette. He had also opted

for the gauntlet cuffs with the three quarter inch stripe two inches from the end of the cuff. His shirt was plain white, but the bow-tie was of the same material as Carla's jabot. And he sparkled. His inability to hold still caused the highlights to softly shift all over. He looked like he's been dusted with fairy dust. Carla giggled, and added a touch of fairy dust look to her outfit. Then the two walked, in step, halfway down the apartment and back at that slow, deliberate pace that Scots bands took when marching. The effect was stunning. An 'I'm going that way and nothing is going to stop me' look to their walk made them not only other-worldly but intimidating.

Muriel smiled, and Mata just stood there with her mouth open. "That's UNREAL!" Mata said. "That walk says, 'I own this place and will do as I please'." Muriel just switched to the same outfit that Carla was wearing, and the three of them made the walk down and back.

"What do you think, Mata?" Muriel asked. "Will this pass for a formal uniform?"

"If it doesn't pass with the snobs, then just turn around and walk out. Anyone inviting you to a formal occasion then rejecting you because you don't meet their standards will quickly realize, when you leave and half the guests follow you, that they blew it," Mata said. "Just that 'nothing will stop me' walk, alone, should convince them that you're not to be messed with and you don't put up with any type of bullying."

"Think we should show Ted?" Muriel asked.

"You? Asking that, timidly? Get serious. What Carla's come up with is pure aggression. It's saying 'I set my own style. Try to keep up, people.' Bold. Tough. Not to be trifled with. Carla, you first went with trousers then switched to kilts. Were you saying that girls could wear either?"

"Yes. Well, actually," Carla went on, "boys could wear either one, too. If they had the guts." Tommy switched to kilts, and everyone laughed.

"Carla," Tommy said, "I think I'm going to have to have some instruction on how to wear a skirt."

"Aw, Tommy, don't worry about it. I'll teach you the little you need to know. You'll catch on in no time."

Tommy switched back to trousers and said, "I think, for the time being, I'll stick to pants. That much draft makes me feel a bit nervous."

"Tommy, did we ever take you through growing up?" Muriel asked.

"Yea. I had to try twice before I caught onto how you did it. Remember?"

"Oh, yea. Well, the reason I asked is that Ted is going to want to know how these look on an adult. Think you can do it in this outfit?"

"Oh, sure," Tommy said. "The hard part was getting it the first time. I can make it grow along with me."

"Good!" Muriel said. "Let's go show Ted, then."

Muriel decided to have everyone start from her office and walk around to Ted's, to give the proper effect. It definitely worked. Ted had caught the movement outside his office and looked up, just in time for them to enter the door three abreast. They stopped when they got to his office area and, standing side by side, grew to adult size and shape. Then dropped back to their normal age.

Ted just looked at them, then threw up his hands. "NOW what am I going to do to keep you busy!" he said. And the three busted up laughing. After a couple of seconds, Ted joined them. "Seriously, not bad at all. I like the shimmer effect as you move, and the lighter color for the formals. You will definitely stand out, and you definitely show that you choose your own style. Can the pants go with the jacket that you're wearing?" he asked Muriel.

"Yep. And the one Tommy's wearing can go with the kilts," she replied. Ted thought for a moment, then stood up and changed. "Looks good. I was right to start with kids and then scale up," Muriel said. "It doesn't work as well starting with an adult and scaling down. Just makes the kids look foolish. Oh, and the kilts can go for men and the pants for women. Personal choice and flexibility. There are some other jackets that could work, too. Heavily modified, of course."

"I'm not wearing kilts," Ted responded, firmly. "Too drafty."

"Coward," Muriel said. "Even Tommy tried them. Then asked Carla for pointers as to how to go about wearing them."

"Humph. I won't dignify that with a response," said Ted. "Now, all we need is a place to wear them. And a LOT of media to record the event," he said with a smile. "How long will it take your friends to choose their versions of formal wear?"

"Probably not long. I'm sure Tommy and Carla have been keeping them informed," Muriel replied.

"And your security squads have already come up with their own version. They look like waiters," Mata said. And she changed into the plain version of what Tommy wore. The differences were that they were the standard medium gray, didn't have the stripes on the cuffs or trouser legs, and the bow-tie was the same color as the basic uniform. Also, they didn't have the fly plaid. And she was right: she looked like a waiter for a high-class restaurant. Well, a waiter in miniature, anyway. She gave an ironic grin at the look. "We could do it, too. Throw a white tie party and dinner, and we'd act as servers. Nobody would realize that we were security." And the grin became impish.

Ted laughed, then got a thoughtful look. "OK, that's a possibility. And with our wearing this new formal wear and hosting the dinner no one could tell us that we were wrong. Hey,

We're not from around here, with the exception of Muriel and her friends. But they're representing Home, so they'd be justified in wearing whatever we say is formal wear. Yea, that would work. Now, all I have to do is think of an excuse to get enough people together of a high enough caliber to draw the media. Hmm"

Muriel, Mata, and Muriel's friends went back to her office and found the place in bedlam. The only ones still in the regular uniforms were the on-duty squad, and they looked hard pressed to continue working. The rest of Muriel's friends and the other three squads were busy trying on formal wear. Muriel just stood in the door, shaking her head and laughing. The squads, of course, were staying with what Mata had suggested, the more muted formal that a waiter might wear, but were busy trying to find the right fit. The kids, though were going through all the combinations of formal that Carla had come up with. Even the boys were trying the kilts version, and there was an awful lot of teasing going on from the girls about looking under the boys kilts. It was a good thing they all were friends, as the teasing stayed friendly and funny, mostly centered around the guys now knowing what it was like to be a girl and try to stay decent.

Meanwhile, Ted was busy trying to compose a generic invitation: "Meet the Ambassadors. You are cordially invited to join us at the Envoy Enclave Guest House on There will be dinner at 7:00 PM local time, followed by a 'Social Hour' that will actually take as long as it takes. This is your opportunity to talk with us and find out what we do and why we do it. White tie formal. RSVP." *Naw, that isn't right*, Ted thought.

::Bart, do you know anything about formal invitations?::

::I know that that one sounds more like advertising,:: Bart replied, dryly.

::Hmm, you could be right,:: Ted sent back. ::Oh, hey, Bart. There's something I'd like you to do::

::Here it comes. How did I know I'd get roped into this?:: asked Bart.

::Because you've been around me long enough?:: quipped Ted.

::I wonder if there's any other leaders that need a GOOD security chief. Oh, Muriel::

::YOU LEAVE MY JOB ALONE!:: Mata mentally shouted. ::I've just got her nicely trained to let me do my job. And there's NO WAY I'm putting up with that overage teenager that you work for. You picked him. YOU live with him!:: Ted and Bart just laughed. And Mata sent them both an image of her sticking out her tongue.

Chapter 5

Party Planning (Thursday)

Mata ended up creating and sending out the invitations, consulting only briefly with Ted and Bart concerning date and location. The wording and artwork were left up to her. The wording came from a search of the Internet. Mata had to admit that sometimes Muriel came in handy. She'd taught Mata to use it for references, and it had come in handier than Muriel would ever know.

Mata had learned a lot about what being a girl meant – what their 'place in the world' was, and not just what it was in America – as well as the things that they had to worry about or be careful about. She also learned about adolescent psychology – what motivated girls Muriel's age and how and why they behaved in certain ways. As it was, Mata was able to head off some problems before they became problems. But only some.

This party that Ted wanted set up would be, in some ways, a coming out party for Muriel. Here, she'd be treated as an adult by the rich and powerful simply because of her position as an Ambassador. Mata wondered if Ted understood the significance of it for Muriel, to be treated like a celebrity by important people. Or that this would actually be her party and not his.

Well, it didn't matter, except to Mata who would have her hands full training Muriel in how to behave without letting her know she was being trained. Games. Play-acting. Maybe a dump or two to let her know who she'd be talking with and their background. The invitations had gone out to other Ambassadors and those heads of state that might be in the country, as well as the top business leaders and politicians of this country. The invitations, themselves, almost guaranteed that the people would attend. They were delivered by Envoys all at the same time and directly to the individual. Plain gray envelopes with the Home logo in the upper left corner and the individual's name centered, held a lighter gray card with the Home logo centered at the top, and the deckle edge coated in real gold held the actual invitation. An RSVP card with a return envelope were also included. The instructions for the card were to simply add their name and put the card in the envelope. It would be collected by the Envoys.

Muriel was right. Sometimes simplicity was better and more elegant than something fancy. Carla apparently was of the same mind, since she designed the new formal uniforms. Now, she was working on how to design the 'utility' uniforms, though Ted didn't know that. She felt that the stripes were too gaudy the way they were. They'd served their purpose, but should be toned down by placement and size. But not by composition or color. The placement of the stripes on the epaulette was a stroke of genius. They were still visible, but not outlandish or garish. They were more like indications of rank. Her security squads had already gotten on board with the idea, and how to readily differentiate between Envoy and trained Human. And her friends . . . oh, her friends, how they'd jumped on the idea.

Suggestions flew like confetti all over the place. Everything from flight-suit style jump suits to business casual and even suits. All ideas were explored as possibilities including color, trim, and look and comfort in all conditions.

Mata jerked her thoughts back to the party. The conference hall of the Guest House wouldn't be large enough. She was expecting somewhere in the neighborhood of five hundred guests, and Envoys were being brought in and trained for security and serving. Muriel's friends would be there, as all of them from Home's point of view were considered Ambassadors. So would their parents and Muriel's parents. And invitations had gone to them the same way the others had. One addition had been made, though. These were not rich people, so Enclave would be providing the appropriate and proper formal wear for them. Over the next few days the shops of Enclave would be VERY busy, but the managers of them – all Envoys – were happy to be doing it – bubbling with the excitement of the party.

Muriel's parents were already there, seeing about what they could get. Muriel had shown them her formal uniform, and suggested something simple for their stripes. And Muriel was with them, making suggestions and offering advice, mostly trying to get them to keep it simple but elegant. She had, casually and in an off-hand manner, suggested that they take the final trip to Home so they could have all five stripes, making it seem that it would be easier to miniaturize all five than just the three they had. They were thinking about it, but hadn't indicated, yet, what their answer would be. The shops her parents were in were side by side and, in fact, managed by the same Envoy. But Muriel was getting dizzy translating between them to observe the progress and make her suggestions and offering her opinions. Her parents and the Envoy just smiled in knowing affability for the nervous behavior. Mata had already gotten with them and with their security chief, Fran, so that they knew just what this meant to Muriel.

The party, itself, would be simple. A period of time before it for the 'reception', with Ted and Muriel mingling with the crowd, accompanied by their security chiefs who would take notes on comments and requests. Muriel's friends would NOT be expected to mingle, but could if they so chose. They were expected to stay with their parents and Envoy guard, for the most part, letting them see some of what they did and how they did it. Near the end of the 'reception' demonstrations of some of the skills would take place. This would be after everyone was seated so they could see. And yes, someone would be shot at with a high power rifle, one of the kids being the target and an Envoy as the shooter. Muriel and Ted would not participate in any of the demos, the implications being that they could do more than the kids.

Then dinner. Each guest, participant and parent would have been supplied with menus to select from, and those menus covered MUCH more than the normal formal occasion. That's because every restaurant in the Enclave would close for the night and provide the food needed. It would, of course, be delivered by Envoy servers translating it directly from the restaurant to the party. Following dinner Ted would speak for a few minutes on the things that Enclave could provide, at a cost. Protection would NOT be included in the 'at cost' list but would be mentioned. Likewise training in Envoy techniques would be mentioned. But the things stressed, and done for a reasonable cost, would be structure building, road building and maintenance, also vehicle maintenance, landscaping and residential maintenance, and

schooling. Mark was working with medical regulators to try to get those with training and his advanced course authorized to perform medical procedures outside of Enclave. So far the results were mixed, as many saw the benefits but many more saw the expense of their schooling no longer being repaid with the high fees that doctors commanded. Many of those that complained were the very ones that could NOT be trained.

Muriel would also speak for a few minutes concerning the advantages of training and some of the types of people that had already taken the training. Both Melanie and Tex had been invited, but it was too soon to expect that they would have responded. Any of their squads or trainees, and Tex now had fifteen trained, but they weren't set up in squads, could also attend. The building that Ted was dedicating to this was more than adequate to handle thirty more people or more, since their families were also allowed to attend. Muriel's parents would sit with her at the main table on a raised platform, but would not be expected to speak. Nor were they EXPECTED to mingle, though they thought they might just to show their support for their daughter and all she had done.

The media. Ah, the media. Feelers that Ted had sent out to the networks and local channels had returned overwhelmingly in favor of their participation. Ted finally had to figure out how to create a pool that they could use for inside the building, but allowed them to have their own reporters and cameramen outside to make note of who arrived. The pool feed would be available to all, but the reporting would be from the station or network and not from on-site reporters. They were allowed to, well actually encouraged to, record the whole approximately four hours, but would be cued in particular for the demonstrations and speeches. They were also encouraged to stay and talk to the guests as they departed and try to get an idea of what questions they might have of Ted and Muriel. Ted did ask that any questions be sent to him so he could answer them, which gave the on-site reporters a lever to getting the information as well as a reason to stay and talk with the guests. After talking with the media, Ted received information that the networks and locals had, on their own, agreed to pool the after party interviews so that all of them could have them.

Fran, without Muriel knowing about it, had been talking to her parents about taking a trip Home. Not as pressure, but as reassurance. She even helped them through a joint self-evaluation in order to prepare them for the ordeal. They understood what the trip would entail and, after the self-evaluation, realized that they were already balanced and just needed to 'officially' recognize it. The trip, itself, was easy, and Fran and two of the squad would accompany them. They were also told that Melanie's father would meet them when they got there. So they would make the trip, but swore Fran and their squad to silence about it. It would be a surprise to Muriel when they were awarded the two extra stripes at the party by Ted, just before the demonstrations.

Transportation would be provided by Envoys escorting guests directly to the street outside the building. These would be the same Envoys that would act as security and servers for the party. Muriel's friends and parents would be offered the opportunity to overnight at the Guest House, free of charge, due to the lateness of the hour and consideration for the kids. They had accepted. In a few cases the families had other children that would need supervision, and additional Envoys were called in to provide that at the Guest House. In fact, they'd be entertained in the conference room, there, with various activities and television,

including feed of the party if they so chose. They would also receive backpacks like their siblings had gotten when they first came out to Enclave, and for much the same reason. They'd get new clothes, though not by making them themselves. Also various toys and objects of interest.

So, the party was on, and would take place in a week. But Mata's work wasn't done yet. When the city declared Enclave as its own school system the word got out, and several parents had approached Ted and Muriel requesting that their child or children be enrolled in it. It had taken Ted some time to get all the legal ramifications sorted out, and provide a bond (which would never be needed) to cover potential injuries and lawsuits. Curriculum for grades from fifth grade through four years of college were created, the college courses being the toughest to come up with as they spanned several disciplines. Permissions were required of the parents of enrollees to allow 'students' to travel with the Envoy teachers for field trips. The only condition to accepting a 'student' was the requirement that they be able to make a mental link, since this was how the actual schooling was done. Some parents asked about training for their children, so it was included in the curriculum, but not mandatory. Now, Mata was getting the required forms sent out to parents in order to transfer their children to the Enclave school system, and Mark was getting ready for a deluge of kids to examine (and correct, as necessary) for physical health.

The city wouldn't take a hit for losing students, as the Enclave school system fell under the city system with regard to federal and state funding. But it would mean less students in the schools involved. Since Enclave was paying the 'teachers' the city didn't have to fire any competent ones, so the remaining students in the city schools would get smaller classes and more individualized instruction. However, there could be a loss of bus drivers and other support personnel. The same building that was being used for the party would be the Enclave school. And school wouldn't start there until after the party was over and rooms broke up the space. Rooms that could be instantly removed for future parties as necessary. They'd already been designed and could be put up in a couple of hours by a squad.

Mata sat back and thought. What was she missing? Oh, shoot! She had to get Muriel away from her parents for long enough for them to make the trip. Ten or fifteen minutes should do it. ::Muriel,:: she sent, ::are you going to supervise your unruly mob? I think they've about decided on utility uniforms, and you'll want to know what they've done::

::Coming, mother,:: she sent back with a smile. ::Sorry, I should have come sooner. Mom and dad have about decided on what to wear, and the poor store clerks are trying to replace the hair they lost::

Muriel translated in to the area in front of Mata's desk and looked at the mass mayhem of the break-room. "Are you sure they're done?"

"Well, nearly. I think they need your influence on simplifying things. They don't seem to be listening to Carla," Mata replied. This was a set-up. Mata had told the kids they needed to keep Muriel occupied for fifteen to twenty minutes, but didn't tell them why.

"Kids, what are you doing," Muriel called as she went back to the break-room.

“Nothing!” they all chorused, and giggled. Standard kids answer, but they were doing it as a tease.

“So, let's see what you came up with, then.” Muriel looked over the assembled assortment of bad taste and tsked. “Really. No ruffles and frills on a utility uniform. Utilities should be comfortable and have nothing that would snag on something. They should also allow free movement. Epaulettes are fine, and we'll put the stripes on them, but on both sides since you won't be wearing a fly plaid with utilities. Shoes, NOT sneakers. Come on, people, you know better than that. You've been wearing shoes for weeks, now. Or, you can opt for boots, and blouse the pant legs. I'm sure SOMEBODY around here knows how to do that”

“How about me, ma'am,” Tex's familiar drawl came from behind her.

“Or me,” said Melanie. “Marines did it all the time. I can even show them how to make them comfortable, so they don't bite into their legs. It's a nasty cheat trick, but it can pass inspection if the sergeant isn't a real nut about 'by the book'.”

“Yep,” said Tex. “Even works with those sloppy Wellingtons. Elastic bands that can be applied to the inside of a turned up cuff. It ain't just Marines that learned all the tricks. 'Course, with just switching into a uniform, having to fuss to get it just right doesn't enter into it. Once you've got it right, you just call it up and there you are, ready for inspection.”

“How about making them as jumpsuits?” Melanie said. “They can look like they're two piece with the tunic covering the waistband enough for a two and a half inch belt, like a kilt belt.”

“Sure,” said Muriel. “You could even use the same belt as you would wear for the formals. The one with the Home logo on the buckle. Single button row down the front, but there won't be any buttons. Open throat. Epaulettes on the shoulders for your stripes. You might not realize it, but you're all officers, and are at least one rank higher than any other officer. So, you need to learn to act like it.”

“What? You mean bossy?” Don said. Muriel just stuck her tongue out at him.

“No, she means that you should learn how to plan and how to think. It's not easy, but I'll stop back here from time to time and dump what I've learned over time. In fact, I can do the first dump now,” said Melanie. “After all, I was a Marine Corps officer, so I can give you the basics pretty easily.” She thought for a few minutes, then said, “Envoys, can you act as a bridge for me? Just link and I'll feed you the dump all together, then you dump it to the kids?”

A chorus of 'yeses' rang out, and the transfer was made. “Now, don't try to access it at once. Give it a day to open up. Then you'll be real butter-bars,” she said.

“Butter-bars?” asked one of the kids.

“Second lieutenants. They wore gold colored bars on their shoulders or collar that

looked like very rich sticks of butter.”

“That gives me an idea,” said Carla. “Muriel, how about something like this?” and she snapped into a gray version of the Marine Corps blues, with the Home logo belt.

“Not bad for Class A's, but not for utilities. Oh, and put a T-shirt under the shirt of the utilities,” Melanie added. “It doesn't have to be real, just look like one where the shirt would expose it. And no stripes on the legs of the utilities, but you can on the Class A's. Utilities are for work. Class A's are like business suits. And your formals are for special occasions. Got it?”

“Yes, sir!” Don rang out.

“Imp,” Melanie replied.

“Monster,” Don tossed back.

“Recruit,” responded Melanie.

“Tired old ex-,” he quipped back.

“Oh, now that's too true. Ex- a lot of things, not the least of which is ex-Marine. But seriously, you'll understand all that stuff in a day, then I'll come back and dump another load on you. But I'll need some time to put it together. Things I learned 'on the job', and things I learned from the Secret Service.”

“And, if you REALLY want to learn how to command, I'll make a dump of the stuff I learned in how to be a sergeant. They have to know more to keep the officers out of trouble,” Tex said with a grin. “Can't go losing officers. Makes the squads look bad.”

::Mata,:: Fran sent. ::It's clear, and they passed easily. They were better adjusted than even I realized. Had a blast meeting Melanie's dad, too::

::OK, thanks. I think this crew is just about settled down, now. They came up with two new uniforms. Utilities and class A's::

::Oh, good for them,:: Fran sent back. ::I was wondering about the bridge uniform. Just utilities and formal would have left a hole::

::Well, they plugged it. And I'm glad to hear your charges passed so easily. I'll alert Ted just before the party so he can put on a show. Thanks. You're a peach::

::Yea, right. You're just trying to say that I'm the pits:: and they both snickered. ::I'm just glad,:: Fran added, ::that you didn't use the “A” word, or I'd have had to come over there and put feathers all over your office:: Fran sent a grin, and Mata sent a stuck out tongue.

Muriel's mother and father showed up, and Muriel decided that lunch was in order.

She couldn't remember having breakfast, but knew she must have. Her 'minders' wouldn't have let her out of her apartment without it. The rest of the day was more relaxing. Muriel's parents showed off what they'd wear to the party, and seemed to be as excited as Muriel was about it. They were asking all sorts of questions about who would be there, and what questions they could answer. Muriel really had no idea what questions might be asked, so the only thing that she could say was to not promise anyone anything. And to keep their shields up.

Chapter 6

The Party

(Thursday afternoon, one week later)

The week went quickly for Muriel and Mata, and only a little slower for Ted and Bart. The building was constructed and the rooms designed and put in, then pulled out whole, desks and all. Finally, tables and chairs were put in for the party and Envoys learned who they would be serving and protecting.

The uniforms had gone over well with the Envoys, and they were enjoying playing their parts. They were serious with Ted and Muriel, but enjoyed the relaxed, casual, bantering environment around the kids. Muriel, on the other hand was run almost to distraction with the training from Mata. It wasn't difficult. There was just a lot of it. The dumps on the backgrounds of the guests didn't help, as they tended to make her jittery as they first unfolded. But, after a day, they just became part of the background and no more troublesome than a memory.

And then it was Thursday. Muriel had just switched into class A's when two off-duty squad members – female – came up and fixed lunch for her. It wasn't that Muriel wasn't capable of doing it. The squad members actually liked doing things for her and enjoyed her company. Maybe because she didn't treat them as employees, staff, or furniture. She recognized their contributions and thanked them for them, and joked and kidded with them just like she did with her friends. And on a day like this, when she was already nervous about the upcoming party, that camaraderie was a help.

Her friends had been bouncing off the walls this morning, just as nervous as she was. She'd finally gotten them calmed down by making them set up a schedule by which to go collect their parents and bring them in and getting them to stay in touch with each other so that there wouldn't be any conflicts coming in. Her friends would take their parents directly to the Guest House and show them their rooms. Siblings would be assigned an Envoy that looked much like a child of the same age – sometimes that meant that two or three Envoys were assigned in the same family. It was her friend's task to make their parents comfortable with the rooms assigned and show them around Enclave. It had taken a surprisingly short time to get them all in and scattered all over Enclave at various restaurants for lunch. And it finally hit some of the parents just how much Enclave and the Envoys were supplying to her friends as restaurant managers came to the table and talked with them, treating her friends as their friends. Suddenly, the parents realized that their child was 'someone important' in Enclave, and they looked at them in a new way.

Muriel's parents had been in and out, helping with some of the more difficult parents and showing off their daughter with obvious pride. The change in them from when they'd first come out to Enclave to see where she would get 'tutored' was something of a shock to Muriel. She realized that, yes, they were still her parents, but now they were her friends, too. Having lived in Enclave for a while and seen what Muriel could do and how important she was had

changed their attitude toward her. They treated her as an adult. It took a bit for that realization to settle in, in her mind. But it was a comfortable realization that simply added to her love for and pride in them.

Ted had the larger job of overseeing the translation of the rich and powerful to Enclave, greeting them and assigning an Envoy to show them around Enclave in a relaxed way before the party would start. Guest House was too small to accommodate all of them, so they were scattered all over Enclave in apartments to use as a 'base of operations', and where they could change for the party. That kept Ted busy most of the afternoon. So it was up to Muriel to get the media set up, linked to the inside cameras and microphones, and places for the on-site reporters to be when the parade of people descended on the building where the party was to be held.

Some of the reporters looked a bit askance at a 'young girl' telling them where to go and how to connect to the inside feed, making sure they had facilities where they could go during lulls in their part of the reporting and things like that. That is, they looked askance until they realized it was the Ambassador, herself, that was taking special interest in them and their welfare. And strangely enough, this calmed Muriel down even more and gave her more confidence in herself. So it was with the poise of 'I belong here' that Muriel allowed them to interview her in advance of the party, setting the media's audience up for the events that would follow without giving anything away. The joking and kidding, on camera, went a long way toward giving the networks and stations a feeling of having gotten individual interviews from the massed interview. It also went to show the audience that this was larger than just some local color or a mildly interesting 'human interest' story.

Squads from both Muriel's and Ted's security detail kept the area in front of the building clear for Envoys and Muriel's friends to translate guests and parents in for the party. And as the afternoon wore into evening guests began arriving. Muriel didn't know it, she didn't need to, but Fran had been in touch with the 'special Envoys' escorting the rich and famous, and when they had shown signs of wanting to make their entrance to the party she had been alerted. Muriel's parents, her prime concern, had been in on the joke that the first arrivals would be them, and greeted on camera by their important daughter. Fran gave Muriel a heads up so she could switch in to her formal uniform, and she alerted the media. Cameras swiveled to the translation area, and Muriel's parents arrived apparently unescorted by Envoys, which indicated that they had had training. Muriel hugged both of them then turned to the cameras and reporters and introduced her parents. A flurry of questions bombarded them, but they got it sorted out that yes, she was their daughter and they were proud of her; yes, they'd been trained, but not by her, their security chief had trained them; no, they were just ordinary people, not someone special. The last brought on a laugh from the reporters, saying that anyone that was the parent of an Ambassador like Muriel MUST be special.

Muriel managed to move her parents to the building and showed them where they would be sitting during the party, itself – giving them a place where they could sit when standing and mingling got to be too much. Showing them where facilities were for when biology overcame social decorum. And then it was time for her to go into her act. The 'rich and famous' were arriving, and she went to the doors to greet them.

"Hi! My name is Muriel. Welcome to Enclave. Thank you for coming." The words were repeated over and over, with minor variations so Muriel could keep them fresh, and always with the name of the person coming in at the time. Envoy escorts moved them on inside where groups gathered and chatted. Then individuals would join other groups in a kind of social Brownian motion typical of gatherings where such people got together. Business, of sorts, was conducted in a casual way and differences were smoothed over. Those in competition with each other in one form or another, political or financial, managed to be civil with each other and sometimes even managed to find common ground. And still Muriel ground on through the long list of names of guests as if it were a common, everyday occurrence.

Some of the guests remarked on how cute it was that a little girl greeted them at the door. Others realized that it was The Ambassador that greeted them, and how unusual that was, socially. Wearing the new formal uniform she looked both young and mature, and nothing in her appearance or manner indicated anything but calm self-confidence. The entrance of the guests had been timed by their Envoys so that each one could be greeted individually, but it was an ongoing timing, as some guests stopped to give interviews to the media on the way in. The guests never twigged to the juggling that went on to keep the line flowing smoothly, but the Envoys knew and it was a great joke to them that Muriel had no more than seconds between the time one guest passed her and the next one approached.

Muriel made her last 'thank you for coming' to the media, or more precisely to the media's audience, before she turned and walked inside to mingle with guests. Mata, who had been lurking nearby during the greetings, began following her around like a shadow. Muriel went from group to group, being sure that they had beverages of their choice and, in general, acting like a hostess – one of the hardest things that Mata had had to teach her. Some of the guests that hadn't realized that it was the Ambassador that was greeting them actually asked if she really was an Ambassador. She usually joked that yea, it was because she was first through the door and they were desperate. And that someday they'd probably realize their mistake. But it wasn't her words that assured them as much as it was her easy manner and adult behavior.

She introduced her parents, on occasion, and that cemented the fact that she was really a human and not an Envoy. Envoys didn't have parents. Sometimes some of her friends would show up and be introduced to these people of power as casually as if they were an even greater power – which, in a way, they were. It began to sink in to these 'important people' that something new had arrived in their social world, and they could either accept it and learn to get along with it or be left behind. Because even these kids, children, were self-assured and comfortable with who they were and wore formal uniforms comfortably and with pride. And they all deferred to Muriel. But not as somebody 'important', but as somebody who'd been their leader and friend for a long time.

Ted had played the 'typical' Ambassador roll, coming in after at least some of the guests had arrived and greeting them individually and in groups – 'working the crowd'. Unlike Muriel, he introduced himself as 'Ambassador Ted', so there was no question as to his rank. Also, unlike Muriel with her casual greetings and manner, Ted was stiffly formal and expected the formal respect from the guests. And got it. People were impressed. But the more lasting

impression was that of the charming little girl that made them feel comfortable yet talked to them as an adult and didn't take insult if they didn't immediately recognize that she was the second power in the room. She didn't realize it, but her parents and Mata recognized it right away. They were playing a game. Ted was the stern, stiff, formal male and Muriel was the soft, warm, comforting female – an archetype right out of legends and myth that worked on a subconscious level. Her parents almost laughed when they caught on.

They worked the room for a little longer, talking with individuals and groups, gathering questions and sometimes answering them. The ones they did answer were about Enclave, what was it like to be trained, how did you get involved with the Envoys, are you REALLY an Ambassador and things like that. The questions they didn't answer were the hidden ones: What can you do for my company? What can you do for me, politically? What do you see as the major problems facing society, today, and how can you fix them? When the hidden questions started repeating themselves Ted called a halt and motioned to Muriel.

“Ladies and gentlemen. If you would all take your seats, please,” her voice at once sounded soft yet carried over the crowd noise to everyone in the room by using shields to amplify the sound. “We have a small demonstration of the training that we've received. Some of my friends will be participating in the demonstrations. Yes, they're kids. But what you will see can be accomplished by anyone with the training. The catch is that you have to be able to establish a mental link to get the training. Not everyone can do that. You SHOULD be able to, but fear or guilt can block it.”

By this time most of the people had found their places again. They'd been shown them initially by the Envoys, and servers helped those that didn't immediately remember. Muriel took her place in front of the head table and was about to begin when Ted interrupted her.

“Muriel, there's something that needs to be done before you get started. We have a couple of people that need to get their last set of stripes.” Muriel's parents came around the end of the table toward her.

“Mom? Dad?”

“Yes, dear,” her mother replied. Muriel looked at Fran who just nodded. Then she looked at Ted.

“Nope. They're your parents and you're in charge of training,” Ted said.

“If it helps,” Fran said, “they passed with no problem, and Melanie's father greeted them in Home. That was last week while you were creating new uniforms,” she added, and grinned.

Muriel looked stunned for a moment, then shook her head and motioned for her parents to raise their arms so the crowd could see. They did, and three stripes became five. Her parents had opted to have the double Turk's Head knot, but the strands were both the same color – ruby red. She hugged her parents, then told them to look in their 'no pockets', where they found their passports. “You're now Citizens of Home as well as American

citizens," she managed to stammer out. The crowd applauded, politely. Her friends and the Envoys applauded enthusiastically.

As her parents returned to their seats and Muriel faced the crowd again there was a flash of movement and a baseball bat hung, motionless above Muriel's head. "Can I have my bat back now?" asked Don, tugging on it to no effect. He even grabbed hold and pulled himself up so his feet cleared the floor.

"I ought to leave you like that, imp," Muriel said, laughing. "Ladies and Gentlemen, my friend, Don, has just demonstrated how we test a person's ability to shield. Personal shields can stop just about anything and hold it there until the person decides to release it," which she did, and Don fell to the floor.

"Monster," he muttered, quietly so that only the whole room could hear.

"Sneak," Muriel replied in the same way. "Now, you may not believe me, but this was a lot quieter than the way I was tested. They shot at me. My own squad shot at me! And I can see that some of you don't believe me, so . . ."

Tommy came out and stood in front of Muriel, then produced a large piece of white cardboard that he hung around his neck on a string. On the cardboard was a bright red bulls-eye target. "Before you get alarmed," he said, "I've been told to tell you that you are all currently covered with shields that would stop a tank. In addition, in order to save your ears, there are sound baffles around the person shooting to damp the sound down. You'll know a gun went off, but it won't be loud enough to hurt your ears." Then he took the target and pushed it out away from his body. A figure appeared at the other end of the room, wearing a camouflage utility uniform and holding a rifle, which she promptly fired at the target.

A hole appeared in the center of the bulls-eye. Tommy lowered the target and plucked the bullet out of the air. "Thanks, Melanie." Then he looked at the target from the front. "A little high, I think," and the crowd laughed. Melanie walked up the aisle in the center of the room, changing to formal wear and losing the gun about half-way up.

"What you've just seen in action," Muriel said, "were three things. First, how we get around. We go from point A to point B without bothering with all the points in between. Second, shielding. Melanie assures me that that particular bullet travels faster than the speed of sound. Shields will stop anything, fast or slow. They can be used to contain or push or just about anything you can imagine. The third thing is, if you were watching Melanie, how to change clothes without embarrassing yourself. Melanie, by the way, is an ex-Marine and quite familiar with that particular weapon. She's currently a United States Secret Service officer."

"What you didn't see," she added, "was that the whole action was coordinated by the mental link between Tommy and Melanie. We don't approve of wasting friends for the sake of a demonstration. Now, about now you're wondering what would happen if these techniques got into the wrong hands. Remember, I said that the first step is to be able to make a mental link. People that would use them for the wrong purposes wouldn't be able to make that link.

Too many secrets. Too much unrelieved guilt. Too much greed. So don't even think of an army of bad guys taking over everything."

"But, aren't you saying that these abilities are inherent in everyone? What's to stop someone else from discovering how to do them?" a voice asked from the crowd.

"Good question," Muriel said. "In all this time that humans have been around have you seen anyone besides us that had these abilities? No. And the reason is that even if they had the instructions on how to do it they're too closed in on themselves to manage to make the training work. In addition, we can tell when someone is aggressive, and we have ways of stopping them that range from restraint to lethal force, depending on the circumstances. The Envoys, themselves, are protectors. That's why there are so many in the room right now. Your servers are also your protectors. They were the ones that put up the shields so that there would be no question of a stray shot hurting anyone. Envoy also means 'messenger', and they are that, too. In this case the message is training and an introduction to what and where Home is. All of the people that have been trained, so far, have also been protectors of one sort or another. Oh, we have other functions that we can perform, but principally we're protectors. Now, I think it's time for dinner," she said, and walked around the table to her place between her parents; her pride in them obvious to any who watched her.

Dinner went as most formal dinners go. There was talking between people seated next to each other, but the level was mild. Mostly it was just enjoying exceptionally good food. Care had been taken to keep antagonistic people apart, competitors and such, so there was no forced politeness. The only moment out of line was when Mark translated in and went to one man and touched his shoulder. A moment later he patted the man on the shoulder and said something to him that even his neighbors couldn't hear, then left. Much later, the man admitted that he'd had the onset of a heart attack. Mark had done something and the attack stopped, and his heart began a stronger beat than it had had in years. His doctor later confirmed that he'd had a bad heart for years. He also confirmed that there was no evidence, now, that he'd ever had a bad heart.

After dinner Ted stood up and talked about the things that Enclave could provide for a price. "After all, if we don't charge for these then people wouldn't value them," he said. "So, things like building and maintaining roads, bridges, culverts and buildings will have a cost, but much less than what it would cost contractors to do, and without the hidden cost of planned obsolescence. Envoys can also do landscaping and maintain properties, private or commercial, and again at a reasonable price. What we don't charge for is protection. We're not in the protection racket. We do protect – that's one of Muriel's jobs as troubleshooter, and she's shown that she can do it very well. We also don't charge for training or education. As you may know Enclave was designated as part of the city school system, and we've been enrolling students this past week. When you leave, tonight, this building will be turned into a school and students will arrive Monday morning for their first classes. Right now, enrollment is a bit limited by space available. We hope to set up other schools here and around the country to take up the slack, but that's for another day. That and training in Envoy techniques are both in Muriel's hands. Is she a real Ambassador? Definitely. In fact, the Envoys of Home were the ones that declared her to be a co-leader of the Envoys. This is no sinecure – she's actually working and working hard. But she seems to enjoy it, and her security detail

sees to it that she has time to rest and time to herself, as well as time to socialize with her friends. The Envoys see her as the bridge between Home and the people of earth, and the training goes both ways. Envoys are constantly learning from her and her friends. So, that concludes this little get-together for tonight. You all know how to get ahold of us with any further questions. Thank you for coming.”

Chapter 7

Aftermath (Friday morning)

Friday morning Muriel's friends took their much subdued and respectful parents home. They'd known that the kids were trained, but had no idea just what it meant. Then they talked with Muriel and Melanie after the party and found out what being a Citizen of Home meant. That it meant that they went and came back under their own power. Then they found out what Home really was as Melanie explained that her father had died when she was ten. So, when Muriel's parents met Melanie's father they'd had to go where the dead go.

"Everybody goes Home, sooner or later. The difference is that we choose to go, and go under our own power and not because we've died. And we come back under our own power. Alive," Melanie had said. "I've done it, more than once. Your children have done it. More than once. Muriel was the first to make it there and come back. That's part of why she was designated an Ambassador. But when the Envoys found out that there were things that they could learn from her, they decided that she should be a co-leader of Home and of the Envoys. She's their darling. In fact, there's a joke going around that if Ted ever threw her out all the Envoys would follow her and not him."

"My parents," Muriel had added, "had made it to stage three. They could translate themselves where ever they wanted to go on earth. But they said that they weren't anxious to go to Home, that they'd get there sooner or later, anyway. I never expected that they'd do it now. But I'm so proud of them. To feel the weight of going there, because no matter how you go you end up judging yourself, at least the first time. And that's a heavy weight. Mom and dad weren't anxious to go through that any sooner than they had to. But they did. I'll have to find out why."

So, finding out what their child-like children had really faced, what they could do, was earth-shaking to them. The kids, realizing this, tried to tell them that they were the same. But the parents knew. Even though such a judgment for a child could never be what it was for an older person, still it had to have marked them. They were different. They didn't guess what would happen – they KNEW what happened after death. And they came back. That was enough to subdue the parents and make them respectful of their offspring. When the kids came back to Enclave and Muriel's office they were a bit more serious than usual, and it took some time before their personalities bounced back. But kids are resilient, and bounce they did, recounting some of the people they'd met and things they'd done.

The building, then a party house, was now a school and just waiting for the students to arrive. All of the students enrolled had the capability of making a mental link. In fact, that had been part of the enrollment process, that they make that link. Otherwise they wouldn't have been able to get the dumps from the Envoys that constituted the education. After that, the school would be more of an enlarged babysitting service. The enlargement was that the students would get to see how things worked and connected, grounding what they learned in

real life. None of them were currently slated to receive the Envoy training. The parents hadn't yet given permission. That didn't mean that it was a forever decision. The parents could change their mind later. But for now they wouldn't be trained. And even if they were, they wouldn't be part of the protective force that Muriel's friends had become. Ted and Muriel both felt that it was time the training went out into the civilian world.

So, Muriel expected that it would be a slow, quiet day, now that the hectic activity of planning the party was over. Mata came in and sat down opposite her, and said, "I have a confession. When I realized that Ted was handing out your phone number to all those people, I had yours redirected through mine. And a number of internal lines added to take the volume. Bart did the same with Ted's. That doesn't mean you can't call out anywhere you want. That just means that when you're on the line and a call comes in it would fall over to my phone. Later on, if you start getting harassing calls, spam, or nuisance calls then I may act as your secretary and screen the calls. But we can decide on that later. However, I did feel that we should initiate the fall-over system now."

"Of course," Muriel said. "You know best. Look, I know I haven't said it before, but don't think I don't know who actually runs this office. And me too, for all that. And I appreciate it. You've given me what you feel I can do without falling apart, and taken the strain of the details off me. Thank you. Even if you are an evil, diabolical monster for plotting with Fran to get my parents their final stripes."

"Yea, and I love you, too, you quirky, infantile beast," Mata replied.

"Good, then since that's settled, what is there for me to do, mother."

"Go on, get out of here before I take a belt to your backside," Mata said.

"Gee, Mata, and here I didn't think you were that type," Muriel said as she quick translated out of her office.

::YOU JUST WAIT 'TIL YOU GET BACK, YOU UNGRATEFUL WRETCH!:: But it was hard to even mentally shout that while laughing.

Muriel sent to her mother to see if it was safe to visit. Her mother replied that of course it was safe, and they half expected that she'd show up, sometime, to find out what happened. Her mother sent an image of the living-room with them sitting in it, and Muriel translated in.

"OK," her mother said before Muriel could even say 'hi', "I confess. It's all Fran's fault." Which set them both laughing. Her father just looked puzzled.

"Well, actually, it was," he said.

"Oh, you old stick. You wouldn't see the humor even if it were explained to you," Lily said.

"Besides," said Fran, popping in. "I found out what was bothering them. The

judgment. I sometimes think that it's kinder to just send trainees Home without knowing what they're going to face. But once I knew what bothered them I could do something about it. I put them through some exercises, together, getting them to find their own faults, or what they perceived as faults. They ended up defending each other. Then they opened up even the private areas of their minds and realized that they really had nothing to be ashamed of, to speak of. So, in a sense, they judged themselves before they ever got there. Between that and meeting Melanie's dad, it was an easy trip."

"Yea, here's this guy we've never met before meeting us like long lost friends," Fred said. "Then he explained who he was and how proud he was that OUR daughter trained HIS daughter, and what she'd become, well, it became a case of comparing daughters. And we figured we hadn't done too badly."

"Actually, that really put the capper on it. Any residual guilt we might have felt just fell away, and we realized that there are some things we just have no control over," Lily said. "We thought we'd accepted you, before. But that's when we really realized just how much you'd grown, mentally. Oh, there are still things that you will have to grow into and make decisions about. But now we have no doubt that you can. We can stop trying to protect you from life. You're well able to protect yourself, and just as able to ask Envoys or even us when you need help or information."

"The real hold-out was Mata," Fran said. "She knew the party was coming up and she saw a way to make it even more about you. Oh? You didn't realize that? This was public exposure of the girl that had dared to face her own judgment, then turned around and judged us Envoys as being old stick-in-the-muds, not with anything you said but by simply coming up with new ways of doing things that set us all on our ears. And that was just in the first couple of days. You made us stretch, you did, just trying to keep up with you. Then you pushed us harder into having to actually come up with new ways of doing things."

"Yes," said Mata, who had translated in. "You pushed everyone. You pushed Mark into creating that battlefield first aid dump. You pushed Caleb into coming out of his shell and realizing that Home had changed, and he didn't have to hide anymore. He even taught you enough so that you could handle large crowds of the dead. And now other Envoys understand what he was doing all this time and have accorded him a lot of respect. You even pushed Ted into finally getting balanced so he could get his fifth stripe. That was the capper. That was the thing that really pushed the Envoys into making you a co-leader of Home."

"Yes, and I even got you and Bart to stop your petty one-up-man-ship," Muriel said, "and put your minds together. Now THAT was a shock."

"More for us than for you," Mata replied. "We were competing in a non-competition area. He's had some good ideas, too, like putting the offices together but separate. But, and rightly, they're ideas for Ted, not for you. That's when the competition stopped, when we realized that what works for one won't necessarily work for another. Something you instinctively do with the way you train people."

"So yea," Mata added, "I held up your parents getting their stripes until the party. It

showed the crowd that you were still a young girl and could act like it. But that you were also competent in your own right, as when you put on the demonstrations. By the way, I thought it was going to be Tommy's Envoy that shot at him. And where'd he come up with the target. Good theater, but who thought of it?"

"Oh, Melanie did. Both," Lily said. "She'd come over to say 'hi' and Tommy was here."

"Tommy comes by?" Muriel asked.

"Oh, yes. They all do. They were always welcome when you were in school, and they knew it. And they liked Fred and I," Lily said. "So they all drop by from time to time and let us know what's happening with our wayward daughter. So, anyway, Tommy was talking about being the target to show the defensive abilities of the shields, and Melanie said that she had the perfect weapon to do it. So she changed into that Marine Corps uniform and was holding that rifle. That thing looks deadly even when it isn't doing anything. She also suggested the target, to show that the bullet had actually passed through the space in front of Tommy to reach his shield. Even so, there will be people that think it was all an illusion."

"Ah. Well, that explains it," Mata said. "In any case, I came to tell you that you were needed at the office. They're holding a man at Reception until they get word that you're back. They're using the excuse that you're tied up right now, and that he'd be more comfortable there than standing around in my office."

"Oops. Gotta go, mom, dad," Muriel said, getting up. "Sorry . . ."

"You go right ahead. We understand. Finally. And we're proud of you," her mother said with a smile.

Muriel translated back to her office and had just set down behind her desk when the man came in. Mata had translated back to her desk and was picking up some papers. The man ignored her and walked directly into Muriel's office as if he owned it.

"Pretty nice place you have here," he said, sitting down. "Must have cost you a fortune. Saw your gig last night. Sweet tricks. The only problem is that we don't have your name on the list of licensees authorized to use them. So, I'm afraid that this is going to cost you some. And the fact that they were televised to a large audience, well, that just ups the cost per incident. Don't you people ever check to see if something you use has patents or copyrights attached before you try to say that they're yours? Tsk, tsk. Well, I think 160 billion ought to cover it. That is, unless you decide to fight it in court. Then, of course, the cost will go up, dramatically. And then there's the court costs and the lawyers fees and such. Nope, I really think that settling is going to be the best thing for you."

Muriel let the man run down while letting Ted know that they might need a lawyer. When he finally stopped talking, Muriel said, "Hi, my name is Muriel. I don't believe I caught your name."

"Oh, that's not important. I'm just here to deliver the message and I'll be on my way."

When you're ready to pay up, just contact my organization," he said, laying a card on Muriel's desk. Then, as he tried to get up out of the chair, he found that he couldn't. "Hey! What's this? You put glue in the chair or something?"

"Well, Mr. Important – or may I call you Not? - we have this thing against drive-by scammers," Muriel said. "I'm sure you understand, being in the business and all, but we have laws against such procedures and tend to enforce them in proportion to the amount that the scammer is trying to get away with. Oh, and we don't stop with just the person that makes the threats, we go for the whole organization. And we don't have any of this piffle about a corporation being a legal entity that's the same as a person except that it can't be arrested and prosecuted under the law, and spend time in jail. Like I said, we just roll up the whole organization. It does have a tendency to shut it down, if you see what I mean. Oh, and when we get done with you there's always the local laws on racketeering. Oh, I'm sorry, to us they're just local laws since they only involve this country."

"Hi, Ted," she added as he walked into her office. "I'd like you to meet Mr. Not Important. At least that's how he introduced himself. He's a drive-by scammer. And he came all the way out of his hole just to try to get 160 billion dollars. Isn't that nice of him?"

"Oh, I know him, well enough," Ted said. "What is it this time? Last time it was building permits, and he said he was representing the city. Turns out they'd never heard of Mr. Peter Schwartz. I'd heard they let him off and he went to Los Angeles. So, Peter, what rock did you crawl out from under this time?"

"You can't do this! I have rights!"

"No, Peter, you have wrongs. And the last time you tried to pull a scam the city said I could keep you if you pulled anything else. Remember?" Ted asked. "You've really got to stop this nonsense and get a job."

"Yea, well this time I've got you," Peter said. "I own the copyrights and patents on everything you do. Bought them fair and square from the company that had them."

"Not possible," Ted said. "Not possible because I'm the one that holds them. I made sure of that even before Enclave was built. Plus, you aren't able to duplicate them in any form because of the nature of the things we do."

"Oh, bull! It's all illusion and you know it. And I found the guy that had created the illusions for you. They're slick, but they're just illusions."

"Oh, really. Well, tell it to the judge. You'll be laughed out of court. Then you'll be in hock to us for so much that you'll never get ahead. Judges can garnishee wages, no matter where you go. And the racketeering charge means it'll be a federal prison. Plus harassment of a juvenile. This could get very serious," Ted replied.

"Illusions! All illusions! And I can prove it."

"Good! This'll be fun! We get to demonstrate that what some people do as illusions we do as reality. And there's twelve kids out there that would be happy to demonstrate that fact. Kids, Peter. Kids that don't belong to any magician's union. Kids that have really done things that you can't even imagine. And then there's the patent officer that was the subject of the proof of what we can do. Poor guy almost had a heart attack when a police officer shot at him. So, Peter," Ted said, "who do you work for this time?"

"He doesn't," Henry Richards said, walking into the office. "He's working this one alone. And he really did buy some patents and copyrights. Brow-beat a poor old lady into selling them to him for \$50." The FBI agent walked over to Schwartz and looked him over. "So, Muriel, you going to let him loose so I can arrest him?"

"Oh, I don't know. He squirms so nice right where he is. I was thinking of using him as an office ornament of what happens when you cross Home, the Envoys, and me," she replied.

"Yea, but he's about to wet his pants, and you know what a nuisance that is to clean up," Henry responded.

"Oh, not the way we do it. Of course if we don't get the target just right he could end up losing something."

"NO! Get her away from me! You can't let her do that! Please, arrest me. I'll tell you anything!" Schwartz was squirming in an agitated way, trying to get out of the chair.

"Oh, all right. Got an evidence bag? You can have his card, too. Untouched by human hands. Well," she said, using a shield to lift the object, "unless you count his. And I'm not sure he qualifies." The transfer was made and signatures were attached, and Muriel released the shield holding Schwartz to the chair and the chair to the floor.

Henry picked him up out of the chair, without touching him, and cuffed him while Mata got Ted to sign a form. The form and a CD were placed in a manila envelope, sealed, and handed to Henry. Schwartz, drifting along behind the FBI agent was still protesting that it was all an illusion. "Yes," Henry said. "But so is life. Would you like to stop THAT illusion?" That shut Schwartz up. "Ted, Muriel, thanks for letting me butt in. With the record and your request for charges we probably won't need you. But do let us know if you leave the country," he said with a grin. Yea, like how do you keep them anyplace when they can translate out. Or at least that was the impression that the grin gave. Then he translated out with his charge.

"Well," Ted said. "That was interesting. What's for lunch?"

"I don't know," she said. "I haven't even had a chance to find out what people think of us, this morning. Are we all about to be lynched in our beds?"

"Not that I know of. The media talking heads are going crazy over your demonstration. Of course, they're going crazy over the little girl that does so much. Was Don's pratfall really necessary?"

“Comic relief. Besides, he suggested it,” Muriel said. “Him dangling, twisting around and jerking on the bat, and nothing moved it or me? Just good theater. At least that's what Mata said. And the pratfall at the end just went to show that this was real. Besides, there had to be something involving me in it, other than my being an announcer. And I needed to stay there to backstop Tommy. Along with his shield, I had one on him that would have stopped an atomic blast. I don't even think he knew about it.”

“Oh, yes I did,” came Tommy's voice from the back of the break-room. “I almost missed getting the slug because I hit the backside of your shield.”

“Good grief! A girl can't even hold a private conversation around here without everyone listening in!” And everybody laughed, which went a long way to making Muriel feel even less secure. Even though she knew they were just teasing.

Chapter 8

Media response (Friday afternoon)

When Muriel caught the news broadcast after lunch the 'talking heads' were more interested in the interviews with the guests than with the demonstrations. Some of the guests were impressed with the abilities of the kids. Others said it was all hokum and they'd seen better magic tricks in Las Vegas. Muriel made a note of those that thought it was all illusion: mostly those from the movie and stage performers organizations. A cold thought occurred to her that what Schwartz had tried to do these others might actually succeed at getting started, and wondered how to head it off. Those from the military were already sharpening their knives trying to figure out how to cut themselves in for the defensive and potential offensive things they could dream up with regard to shields and translating. It seemed that there were a bunch of the 'rich and famous' that thought they could get a cut of it, one way or another, regardless of the fact that they'd been told flat out that it couldn't be done.

"So, how do we deal with this?" Muriel asked.

"I'll tackle the military," Ted said, "you go after MPAA and convince them that trying to sue us is useless, unless they want to make more of a laughingstock of themselves than they already are. You could even add that we're thinking of starting our own company, and that we wouldn't be joining their organization if we do. We'd compete directly, and charge less. Of course we won't, but they don't know that. However, they were warned to change their business practices, and I see that they haven't. They're suing more people now than ever before. Some of them might even have actually copied something.

"Oh, thanks. You take the easy one. You just bull your way in, grab a general and stand him in front of a tank and pull the trigger. After he has his heart attack and picks the shell out of the shield he'll understand that it's not something that just anybody can do. End of discussion." Muriel stuck out her tongue at him.

"Actually, I expect to hear that anybody can do it, and it doesn't need a mental link to learn it, therefore I WILL teach his soldiers how or will be arrested. That will prove interesting."

"Hmm. I've actually got an idea for MPAA that should settle their hash. Aside from the fact that we have the licenses to show the movies whenever we want," Muriel said. "Yea, I've seen them, and I'll take a copy with me. No, the killer is that I know they're not only lying about us but also about a lot of the people they're suing. They're also lying about the amount of piracy that's going on, and that it's their own people that are doing it on a commercial scale. Either they back off or I make the facts public in such a way that they'll have very few people going to their movies."

"Oh, and in addition," she added, "we can hire the directors and producers away from

them and start our own company, ending their monopoly. And when they go bust, we'll just buy up their properties. That's when it gets REALLY nasty."

"Hmm. You know, something you said gives me an idea. There's going to be an arms demonstration, soon. Having a kid walk through a live-fire demo without being hurt should cause some of the war hawks to think seriously about the stupidity of warfare. Especially if, on the way back, the kid renders the weapons inoperable, I mean like crushing or melting them."

"They'd probably want to charge us for the weapons," Muriel responded.

"Likely. But not if I word the agreement correctly," Ted said. "A challenge. One child . . ."

"Oh, I can just hear who that child would be," Muriel grinned.

"One child against their armed might. And whoever loses has to accept the losses."

"Yep. I'd do it. In formals, with kilts. Get them to put a couple of tanks in there to try to run me down, too. That would be fun," Muriel added.

"You wouldn't!"

"Oh, sure. Seize the engine, seal off the fuel, make the ammo inoperative, then tip them upside down." Now she was really grinning, but in a rather evil way. "Let them get their people out of the tank, afterward. And if they can't and have to ask us for help, all the better."

"Maybe I should let you deal with both. I'll back you up with the facts and figures for MPAA," Ted said, "and you can back me up with the challenge."

"OK." And Muriel smiled sweetly up at him.

"You know? I fear that sweet smile of yours more than the evil one you had before. You're enjoying this."

"You bet," she said. "I LIKE putting bullies in their place. And as far as I'm concerned, their place is buried. Speaking of bullies, how long would it take you to set up something with the military?"

"Nicely put: 'speaking of bullies'. You are DEFINITELY one nasty girl. Give me a couple of minutes with a phone, and I'll see what I can do. Tanks, huh?"

"You're welcome," she replied.

"No, I said . . . oh. Never mind. That was an OLD joke."

"Yea, but the good ones keep coming back," Muriel grinned at him.

Muriel left Ted in her office and went out to talk to Mata about what she would need for the MPAA, to settle them down. Mata had already been on the phone to the lawyers, and Amicus Curiae letters were already being typed. Well, actually, the headings were being typed. The letters themselves were generic for the type of case, and the lawyers had them readily available knowing that sooner or later Enclave would be involved in the whole 'piracy' issue. In addition, their chief lawyer had seen the a copy of the letter the MPAA was intending to send them, and had already typed up a response, just lacking an amount and a signature to make it ready to go. Muriel gave him an outrageous amount, and, when it was filled in and printed, translated it to Mata's desk and signed it. Her title and other baggage was already listed under her signature.

As she sent it back Ted came up and said, "It's on for tomorrow morning. Can you be awake in time?"

"Oh, sure. I'll make sure you're up," Muriel tossed back, not letting his attempt at needling her go to waste. "The letters are ready to go on our signal. So, if I give you the word, just call Mata and tell her to send them. She'll flash all the lawyers the signal, and they'll be gone. No retrieval. Once sent they're on their way."

"Good. Then shall we be on our way? I've got a visual on the office. It's why I took a little longer. We can bypass all the secretaries and just bust in. Uniform?"

"Class A's, but with the iridescent effect. I think we'll continue that for the Class A's. It kinda spiffs them up a bit. Choose your own shoes or boots," Muriel said.

"Why, what are you wearing?"

"Combat boots and bloused pant legs. I like the effect. Melanie showed me. First time I saw it I thought, 'Wow! Dressy but ready for action'. Melanie said it's what the military police wore. The only thing lacking from the uniform is white gloves and a .45 caliber hand gun. I don't think we need those."

"No," Ted said. "Definitely not the gun. And I'd have to see the white glove effect before I could say one way or another." Muriel showed him and he agreed that it was a bit much.

"OK, now here's the deal. The head of the MPAA is a woman. She has a letter on her desk, sent by their lawyers for her to sign. Of course, the lawyers' signatures are on it, too. It's to the court requesting a lawsuit against Enclave and the Envoys – we're named – for illicit public performance of various movies – and they list them – without a performance license, etc., blah, blah, blah. She's ready to sign it, but is delayed by an appointment with the head of one of the studios. I know. I sneaked a look. So, shame on me."

"Oh, the perfidy! Yep. You handle the appointment . . . yes, I see him, so I'll come out in this position to you. Ready?"

They translated.

“You!” Ted said in command voice. “You will sit quietly and not say anything until we leave!” It wasn't so much a command as a statement of fact. He was in a tight shield, and Ted had relaxed his vocal chords so they wouldn't be able to make a sound.

“My name is Muriel,” Muriel said, pulling out her Home passport. “That's Ambassador Muriel to you. Don't bother introducing yourself, I don't care who you are. You have a letter on your desk that you would be advised not to send out. I am ready with a letter of my own for counter-suit that would bankrupt you and all the studios that you represent. In addition, you will instruct the various studios that they are to withdraw the lawsuits they have against anyone for what you call piracy immediately and with prejudice. Or in simple terms, they won't be able to bring action against those people or whatever ever again. Most of those lawsuits aren't valid, anyway. The only reason you've started them is to intimidate poor people into making astronomical payments to you. That's one of the worst kind of scams that there is. Continue such behavior and you will find yourselves without the very people that you rely on to pay for the movies. So stop it! Fail in either and we will make laughing stocks of all of you, bankrupt you all, and buy any properties for pennies on the dollar. In other words, your reign of terror on the very people that make you rich is at an end. Do you understand what I've just told you? Just nod. You have no questions that I want to hear, nor any rationalizations.”

When the woman nodded, Muriel added, “Good. Then see that it's done immediately. I do know what your studios' financials look like. Not the fakes you show the government but the real, twisted, screw your buddy financials. You've been robbing from your own people. So, our first action, after sending the letter to the court, would be to publish those financials. You'd be inundated with lawsuits so fast your head would spin. Be advised. All lawsuits are to be dropped by Monday morning at 10:00 AM, your local time. And we WILL know.”

Muriel gave the signal and Ted released the man and they translated out.

Ted just looked at her when they got back to her office. It was something like the look one would give a Black Mamba that was three feet from your nose.

“What? If I'd given her a chance to talk she would have taken all afternoon, and we'd have had to release the letters. As it stands,” Muriel said, “there's a chance that she will actually do what she was told to do. Slim, I admit, but a chance. Oh, by the way, I have a confession to make. They don't know it yet, but I saw a time when Enclave might have to take action against the movie studios and MPAA. I talked with Mata, and she talked with the Envoys in charge of investments. Enclave actually owns voting control of all the studios. It's through several sources that don't directly trace back to us, but it's there.”

“And that Envoys have been on the phone to the proxy investors. They'll be on the phone to the studios telling them to shut down the litigations,” Mata said. “I turned them loose as soon as you left,” she said, smugly.

Bart appeared behind Mata, trying to hid a smile. Ted looked at Muriel, then Mata, then

back to Muriel. "Now I know," he said, "how you manage to get everything done. Mata does it, and you take the credit for it."

"Of course," Muriel said, sweetly. "Mata does a great job. I'm just the figurehead that does what she's told. Well, all right, a rather skinny no-figure head." And Bart and Mata burst out laughing. Somewhat grudgingly, Ted joined them. Muriel just kept smiling sweetly.

"OK," Mata said when she calmed down. "I just got an update. The head of MPAA is currently ripping her lawyers up into little pieces. The clown in the office has been on the phone to his studio demanding that they call the lawyers and kill the lawsuits. Oh, now the head of MPAA is calling a different studio. Sounds like they're resisting, saying they've got the power to crush Enclave. She just canceled that call and is calling another studio. Ah, this one's more cooperative. Oh! I see. They had a shareholder's revolt. The shareholders threatened to oust the board and chairman if the lawsuits weren't immediately canceled. Sounds like our crew in investments made them an offer they can't refuse. Now that second studio is calling back. They've canceled the lawsuits. No reason why, but you can bet they got the same treatment the third one did."

"How are you getting this information?" Ted asked.

Mata pointed to the on-duty squad. "Two of them are monitoring the office. Same thing we do to get a visualization, but with sound."

"Is that legal?"

"Nope," Mata replied. "But since we're not using it for legal means or to get the jump on a competitor, I doubt that it will matter. Oh, and a third one is monitoring the courts. Half the lawsuits have already been listed as canceled. We should have the rest by Monday morning."

Ted looked at Bart. "Why do you think I'm standing here?" Bart said. "I'm learning. Mata's good at organizing. You knew that when you teased her into taking the job. You figured that someone would be needed to keep 'the kid' straight. As it turns out, they make a very good pair. Muriel provides the ideas, Mata implements them, and hands them back to Muriel to do the dress-up work."

Ted just shook his head. "I give up. Muriel, you're in charge. Head Ambassador. Head leader of the Envoys. Everything. I'll stay around and just look handsome. I know I can't look intelligent. You people are driving me crazy."

"Short putt. Not even a valid one. Just kinda dribbling on the green," Bart said with a straight face. Ted just growled, which raised some more laughter.

"So, what kind of stunt are you going to pull, tomorrow?" Ted asked.

"That depends on what they've got set up. Speaking of which, how did you get something set up so fast?" Muriel asked.

“Oh. I didn't. I thought I remembered something going on, tomorrow, so I called to find out. It was simple enough to get an invitation to come out. The arms manufacturers, of course, think that we're potential new customers,” Ted said. “The military was intrigued that we think we can withstand whatever they throw at us. So we get to show up both sides of the problem at the same time.”

“And the media will be there,” Bart said. “After what you did at the party, Muriel, they are most anxious to follow you around and see what kind of theater you'll perform, next. They don't usually cover arms displays and demonstrations, but with you there they are expecting something outlandish. I can't imagine why,” he said, dryly.

“Gee! Neither can I. I'm just a little girl,” Muriel replied, innocently. “I wouldn't do anything to disrupt adult things. I wonder if they'll let me watch.”

This brought a snort from Ted. “Just remember that some of it may be explosive rounds. Don't let anything get inside your shields.”

“Yes, boss,” Muriel said with a smile. “I'll be a good little girl and keep my hands behind my back. I'd keep them in my pockets, but my uniform doesn't have any.”

“We should probably take a squad with us, too,” Ted said. “One each. After all, we are important people. Wouldn't want anything to happen to us.”

“Yea, like it could,” she replied. “So, where is this being held?”

“The arms manufacturers have a place where they test weapons and ammunition. The only military that will be there is the top brass and some military police. And yes, there'll be a prototype tank there,” he said.

“OK,” Muriel said, “utility uniforms for 'the troops'. Class A's for us, bloused boots, I think. Unless you think we should also be in utilities. I wonder if we can get armbands made up with 'SECURITY' on them.”

“Like this?” Mata asked and switched to the new utilities, black boots, bloused trousers, black belt with a plain buckle, and black triangular armbands attached to both shoulders with the Home logo and the word 'SECURITY' in white below it. “What do you think, Ted.”

“I like it. It looks sharp and very professional. Why black belt instead of gray?,” he asked.

“To differentiate between us and Muriel's friends. As for the armbands, I thought of using the word 'PROTECTION' instead, but it's too long. MP is flat out. We're not military. And we're not police, so that lets that out, too. But the black stands out against the gray and distinguishes us from you. It also matches the boots. We considered utility hats, but I'm not sure.”

“Yea,” Ted said. “I wondered about hats, too, then decided against them. Yes, they block out sun and sky glare. But we can do that without them. We don't worry about rain. And the drawback is that they block out whatever is happening above direct eye level. I used to go almost spastic trying to see all over when I wore them. No hats unless you can think of a good reason to wear them. No helmets, either. And NO marching. I know we could, but we ARE civilians.”

“Ah! The panther look. As if at any moment we were going to attack with our bare teeth and fingernails, and looking everywhere for something to attack,” Mata said, with a grin. “Hey, that works for me. I seem to remember my boss doing that one day.”

“So, we're all set for tomorrow?” asked Muriel.

“Yep,” replied Ted. “We've finished the 'hurry up'. Now we get to wait.”

Chapter 9

Muriel Gets Worse Every Day (Saturday)

::Hey, sleep-head,:: Muriel sent to Ted. ::You going to get up sometime so we can show the military how useless they are?::

“Don’t have to,” Ted said from behind her, making her jump. “I’ve been up for hours.”

“Oh, yea, right. I could hear you snore through the walls.”

“It’s a recording,” Ted replied.

“It is, now! I recorded it to show you how loud it was. And it’s time stamped, so don’t give me that ‘hours’ stuff,” she shot back. “Seriously, do you know where we’re going?”

“Well, we’re supposed to check in at the front gate. But I’ve half a mind”

“I know,” Muriel interrupted. “In fact, we all know. Bart has the other half.”

Ted stuck his tongue out at her. “Very well, I was thinking that we’d just translate in to where the displays and demonstrations are going to be held.”

“Why not do both? Jump the line at the gate. After all, we outrank mere generals. Then translate directly from the gate to the site,” Muriel said.

“Don’t let the generals here you call them ‘mere’. They’re touchy about their rank.”

“They’ll be touchier about it if they get demoted to second lieutenant,” Muriel responded. “Seriously, how hard would it be to land in that area between the lanes, headed up to the guard shack?”

“Hmm. Not hard. But how do we break into the line?”

“Oh, that’s easy. I’ll have my squad handle it. Just let me know when there’s a general’s car two cars back from the gate. That should give us enough room,” Muriel said.

“You’d cut off a general?” Ted asked.

“Of course. You don’t expect me to play with his . . . ,” Ted raised his eyebrows at her, “troops, do you?” And Muriel grinned at what Ted THOUGHT she was going to say.

Ted just shook his head. “You get worse every day. OK, we’ll play it your way. I suppose you have a reason for that.”

"Darned straight, I do. Establish authority right off the bat. If he wants to argue with an Ambassador and head of state, then he doesn't deserve his rank. And I'll be happy to see that it's pulled." Muriel looked grim.

"Obviously, you've never heard of the Peter Principle," Ted said.

"What! You mean where competent employees are promoted until they reach a level where they're no longer competent? Of course I have. And politicians and military are the worst offenders because they can do the most damage," Muriel said. "I've also heard of 'managing upwards', where the competent underlings manage to convince the boss on how things should be done. How do you THINK I manage to deal with you?"

The explosive sound from Mata's desk was evidence enough that she'd be cleaning off her screen. Again. She was beginning to think that she should really stop drinking that grape and berry combination at her desk.

Ted just glowered at her and muttered something that sounded like, "Puppies. Next time puppies, and drown them at birth." This caused another, less liquid, snort from Mata who carefully set her glass down.

"So, when do we go?" asked Muriel.

"Soon. We should probably form up outside. They haven't opened the gates, yet, but should in the next few minutes," Ted replied. "There's quite a line, including transport trucks for troops. Looks like there'll be a couple of hundred troops there. Or more."

As they trooped outside, Muriel said, "Aim for the median, but be ready to move into the road. My squad will cover the rear and stop the traffic."

They formed up, and Ted looked back. "Aren't you facing the wrong way?"

"Nope. We're facing the traffic we'll be stopping. They're going to be in for a surprise if they try to run us down. We'll put up an anchored shield that would stop a tank. Or more. Believe me, they'll stay put," Muriel said.

"You're looking for a fight, aren't you." Ted made that a statement. There was no question in his mind.

"No," Muriel replied, quietly. "Not looking for, no. Expecting, yes. There's a chance that they'll act civilized. But it's a slim chance. The people that achieve the sort of power that these men have aren't noted for being civilized. More 'full of themselves'. Self-important. They don't believe that anyone else is important. That's why I'm taking no chances. Just be ready to move when I do."

Mata stood in front of a line of five, and Muriel stood directly behind the center of the line. Muriel and Mata had chosen a 'kids' squad for this foray, and Muriel expected that she'd

have to 'pull rank' on the person in the car. She sensed the gate move, and the cars ahead begin to go. And they translated.

"Get out of the way!" The car was directly ahead of Mata and the squad, two feet from Mata. And the 'gentleman' exiting the rear passenger side door did not look pleased. He also happened to be a general. "Lieutenant, get those kids out of the way!"

"General," Muriel amplified her voice, "you will get back in your car and be quiet." She headed directly toward him, cutting through the thin, gray line of her squad. "Move, Havershaw. Now!" By this time she was three feet away from him, and could read his name tag easily.

"Little girl, get these kids out of the way. You don't belong in the middle of the road blocking important people."

"Havershaw, you're incompetent. I know for fact that my face has been all over television the past few weeks. I also know that a flier was sent out to all military sections identifying me. My name is Muriel. I'm the Ambassador from Home to the people of America, and co-leader of Home. You want to talk about important? You've just been trumped by someone who's equivalent rank is higher than yours. A head of state. Now get back in your car."

"Little girls aren't made head of state," he said with a sneer. "And I certainly don't have time for someone's childish attempt at humor with some flier saying one is."

"That's unfortunate, Lieutenant Havershaw," said a male voice beside Muriel.

"It's GENERAL . . . uh . . . oh."

"Yes, Lieutenant. I had to accept you, since you were named by a predecessor. That doesn't mean I have to keep you. The young lady you just insulted is, in fact, an Ambassador of some accomplishment and a head of state. You should have kept up with reality. Instead, you will be going back to Washington with me. You! Lieutenant. What's your name?"

"Marshal, Mr. President."

"Well, Marshal, I can't very well jump a first lieutenant to general in one move. Especially one named Marshal. We'll have to settle for full Colonel. Will that do? And can you handle the responsibility that Havershaw has managed to foul up?"

"Yes, sir, and yes, sir I can," said now Colonel Marshal. "I'm afraid I'll be a bit out of uniform until I can get back to the fort, though."

"Oh, no problem. I think your insignia is enough similar to the Marine Corps that I can fake it for you." Melanie, on the other side of the President, looked at the Colonel for a moment, then said, "How's that?"

"Looks pretty good, ma'am. I can always change it when I get back, if necessary. And Miss Ambassador, would it be possible to talk with you sometime?"

"Any time. We'll be inside for a while. I'm sure you'll be able to find me. Or at my office. Just ask at Enclave's Reception and they'll bring you to me," Muriel said. "Oh, the flags. Should they be removed?"

"For this occasion, just changed, I think. Can that be done?" the President asked.

"Easily," Muriel replied. And one after the other the general's star was replaced by the 'bird' of a full colonel.

"Well, Marshal, you may be the first flag officer that was a colonel. We'll see how that works out. We need to be getting back." The President nodded at Melanie and the two, with Havershaw in tow, translated out.

"Colonel," Muriel nodded to him, "I'll see you again. I see my partner in crime has passed through the gate and translated to the field. I'll just join him. Good luck!"

"Thank you, ma'am. I'll look for you on the field."

The squad, by now, had formed up into a square with Mata on one column. Muriel took the other, and they disappeared.

They reappeared within yards of the display area – a large covered area containing tables that held guns and ammunition of various types. Ted was slowly walking down one aisle looking at the armament and chuckling to himself. Muriel joined him, wondering what he was chuckling about.

"Typical American salesmanship. All of these are 'new and improved'. There's nothing new here, and the improvements are minor. They're just trying to resell the same weapon with a different color or look without improving the basic operation," Ted said. "Now you know why the defense budget is so high. Idiots like Havershaw are taken in by such sales devices and insist that they need the latest and greatest."

A voice from behind said, "Yes, and that's why I was assigned to him, over his objections. He had a strong voice in procurement and no sense of judgment or responsibility."

Ted turned and looked. "Colonel Marshal. Congratulations on your sudden promotion."

"You must be Ambassador Ted. Thank you, sir. I actually was a Major, so it isn't that much of a jump. I was pushed in as a lieutenant to find out what was going on. I have a hunch the President knew," Marshal said.

"I see you survived our little terror," Ted said, grinning. "And it's just Ted. I hate using

titles unless I absolutely have to. You'll find that Muriel is the same way."

"Actually, I found Amba . . . I mean Muriel to be quite refreshing. I've seen sergeants that couldn't have ripped up an underling as well, and they're noted for being able to chew someone out to the point where they melt onto their feet. And in such a calm, quiet voice. Remind me never to cross her." Both Ted and Muriel laughed at this.

"So, Colonel, what did you want to talk to me about?" Muriel asked.

"Training. Can anyone take it?"

"Anyone that can pass a basic test. This isn't the most opportune place to try it, though, with all the distractions around," she said.

"I'd like to try, anyway, if you don't mind. I'll try to focus on just what you tell me."

"OK, we're going to play a head game," Muriel started. "I want you to see where I am and what I look like. Sorry I'm not beautiful. You'll have to wait a few years for that. Then close your eyes and reach out with your mind. Mentally tap me on the shoulder and say 'hi'. All in your mind. Nothing physical."

Marshal looked her all over for a moment, placing her distance from him and visualizing her face. Then closed his eyes. ::Hi::

::Hello, back,:: Muriel sent. ::Yes, you can be trained::

Marshal's eyes snapped open. "That's it? That's all it takes?"

"Yep," Muriel said. "Those with too many guilty secrets, or anything they want to hide can't do that. You, as a military man, may have secrets, but they're not the type that you feel guilty about. Greed for money or power are top of the list, but there are many more. Just about anything you feel guilty about can cause you to not want to open up to another person, mentally. Find a couple of days – four would be best, just in case – when you can come by my office and I'll see that you're trained."

"Um, ma'am, what will it cost?"

"Well, let's see. We'll provide the training – it may not be me. I have a pretty good trainer that wants more experience – also food, lodging, clothing as necessary, transportation if you don't mind someone coming to pick you up. There's even some entertainment for your free time as well as a suitcase for whatever you're currently wearing. If you complete the training then you'll also get a passport from Home certifying that you are a Citizen of Home," Muriel rattled off. She noticed, as she went on, that he looked more and more worried.

"Um, that's got to cost a lot. Military personnel don't get paid very much . . ."

"Marshal, that's what we provide. We don't charge for training, and the rest is all part

of the training. We WANT capable people to have the training,” Muriel said. “My parents couldn't have afforded it, either. Ted tricked them into thinking that I was just getting tutoring in my classes so I wouldn't fail. Well, I got that, too. As well as shot at, joked with, teased, insulted by a pompous jack-ass and a few other things. I also met a friend that had died over a year ago. If that frightens you, then you don't want the training.”

“How is that possible? I mean meeting someone that was dead?” he asked.

“Home. You'll make a trip there and back under your own power. It can take just a couple of minutes, or as long as you need. Where do you think people go when they die? Everybody goes Home, sooner or later. You'll just have the opportunity to do so while still alive.”

Marshal's mouth hung open for a moment. Then he said, “No wonder the State Department had so much trouble understanding where Home was. There was no location that they could threaten. Gad, I think I can just hear what the conversation was like. 'Where are you from?' 'Home.' 'Yes, but where is your home.' 'Not my home but everybody's Home.' 'Would you locate it on a map for me?' 'Your maps don't show where Home is'.” And he busted up laughing.

“I think you'd better stick with us, Marshal. Your cohorts in crime are beginning to look at you funny. Us, they expect to be funny, so you'll fit right in,” Ted said. And, of course, this just served to set the colonel off even more. Muriel and Ted finally had to stop and wait for him to calm down.

When he had finally settled, some, Marshal said, “All of these men, here, the rankers, that is, not their security forces, they're all 'men of power'. They won't understand what you have to offer, and they won't understand that you can stop anything they can throw at you. Yes, I saw you in that news report, Muriel, and recognized you. I also saw that viral video of a bus driving wildly with an RPG one foot from the skin of the bus. That had to have been one hellacious trip, hanging onto that and trying to keep it from exploding. Good job.”

“Thanks. I didn't think anyone outside of Enclave had seen it,” Muriel replied.

“My fault, Muriel,” Mata said. “I had it leaked to the Internet. I didn't think you would mind.”

“Oh, I don't mind. I just didn't know it had been done.”

They walked around a bit more, 'admiring' the various arms on display and finally reaching the mobile units – tanks and armored personnel carriers. “I don't see any new technology here,” Ted said. “All just the same old same old. Muriel, you shouldn't have any trouble at all, and that's if you were sick and half unconscious,” he said, grinning.

“Any targets in the demonstration area?” Muriel asked.

“Well, I see a couple of trucks out there, that's about it,” Ted said.

“They’ll probably have a remote-controlled convoy go across, too,” Marshal said. “They usually do at these things.”

“So much the better. They’ll get to see that I can even protect a moving target. Think they’ll take a tank out there after me when I show them up?” Muriel asked.

“Well, you can hope so. I KNOW how you want to show how a tank can be stopped,” Ted grinned.

Chapter 10

Military Mishaps

(Later Saturday morning)

It was much later in the morning when the demonstrations were finally begun. Muriel had disappeared just as they were announced, though her squad was still with Ted and the now attached Marshal. First up was 'target practice', using various of the rifles to show accuracy. When none of the bullets hit the targets, and there were ten men and ten targets, the manufacturers were red-faced and the military grumbled about shoddy workmanship. They tried again with different guns with no better results. Even the sniper rifles which had been dialed in successfully earlier couldn't put a mark on a target.

As the manufacturers huddled together to decide what to do next, Muriel came out from behind a target and quietly gathered the spent ammo out of what seemed like thin air. Marshal's laughter caused the military to take note of the action. One little girl quietly gathering up the bullets into an invisible bag. Comments from the crowd, like, 'What's that girl doing out there?' and 'There shouldn't be anyone on the field during the demonstration. She could get hurt' filled the air.

The manufacturers decided to strike the targets and use field pieces to destroy the trucks. It was a good decision, under the circumstances, but unfortunately had no better results. None of the trucks even quivered from a passing shot. And these projectiles were large enough to be seen in the air from the stands. They'd just stopped. In mid-air. For no apparent reason.

This time, due to the size of the ammo, when Muriel came out she was trundling an invisible wheel-barrow. She'd waited for the lull before coming out, but by now all of the military was watching what she was doing and commenting. Some of it was quite derogatory toward the manufacturers.

At a mental suggestion from Ted, Marshal said, loudly, "Do you suppose she's stopping the rounds from reaching the target?" Military heads jerked around hard enough to dislodge one or two hats. This time the comments were concerning the ability, or lack of ability, of a young girl to stop high powered rifle and field piece rounds. The manufacturers finally took notice of Muriel's presence on the field and sent some of their employees out to bring her in to 'safety'. As an aside, Marshal noted that, not only was her uniform not rumpled, her boots still seemed to be highly polished despite the dust out there.

Three of the manufacturers employees managed to corner her and made a grab for her. She eluded them by escaping straight up. And her voice could be heard even in the stands, and louder than the public address system, as she quietly said, "Nya, Nya! Can't catch me." One of them drew a handgun and fired at her. She calmly picked the round out of the air and said, "Thanks." The round went to join the rest. "Now why don't you try with something larger?"

Two tanks entered the field, angled in on her. The other employees scattered and returned to the viewing area. Muriel returned to the ground and waited to see whether they'd try to fire or run her down. When one of them stopped the other charged ahead, bouncing over the craters left by previous demonstrations. Suddenly, it stopped. The treads were still spinning merrily, digging up clods of dirt and throwing them, but the tank was going nowhere. Then the treads stopped and so did the engine, and the whole tank rotated slowly up at the front, and gently laid itself down on its turret, which was now aimed back the way it had come. While this was happening the tank that was standing off fired three rounds at her that simply stopped in mid-air. Shortly, it, too, was upside down on its turret, engine stopped.

"Gentlemen," Muriel's quiet voice rang out. "You've had your fun. You military have, for some time now, wanted to know where Home was and how to attack it, and or force it to your will. You arms manufacturers have made claims that what you build could kill anything. And now I've shown you both the stupidity of your thinking. Home is not in a location that you can reach simply because of the way you think. Only those with the training can reach it and return alive. As for your weapons and ammunition, well, you've seen what one little girl can do. Nothing you fired hit what you intended it to hit."

"Get real, gentlemen," she continued. "This is not a game that you play. It is something that involves real human lives – lives better served raising families and contributing to the richness and success of this country. But your greed and single-minded stupidity is killing them unnecessarily. Wars can be stopped. Without deaths. Without ammunition or weapons. Without the expenditure that is bleeding this country dry. There is a better way. You've had your fun, both in the past collecting your money and playing your war games, and today trying to kill one small child. How do you think that's going to look to the rest of the country? Or the world? That all the might you could throw at me simply stopped. One. Little. Girl."

At that moment something sailed over the top of the crowd and seemed to wrap itself around Muriel's shield. Dozens of explosions went off as if they were chained.

"MURIEL!" shouted Marshal. Ted grabbed him.

"Wait," Ted said. "Do. Not. Move. Don't say anything more."

"But . . . she's got to be dead. Nothing could live through that!"

"Wait," said Ted.

The explosions stopped. The air cleared. And one small girl stood there with not even a hair out of place. "Coward! You would try to silence the truth by killing a child when you thought it was distracted. COME HERE!" A figure rose over the crowd and landed three feet away from Muriel. "Tell me, do you think you could have lived through that? Would you like to try? I know, you weren't the one that fired that weapon. But you were the one that ordered it. You are guiltier than the man that pulled the trigger. Do you think that you could face judgment knowing that you had done that? Mata . . ."

“NO!” Ted said. “Bart, send one of the squad to secure him and take him to the local police. The charges are attempted murder of a child and the attempted assassination of an Ambassador. Mata, guard your charge!”

Ted walked out onto the field, Bart and the remainder of his squad following him. He turned and addressed the crowd. “You’ve seen what one child can do against your armed might. You’ve seen what one of YOU attempted to do. Attempted and FAILED! Ambassador Muriel would have been within her rights to have defended herself by killing the man. She didn’t. And believe me, when I say kill I’m talking about something infinitely worse than the death of the body. His soul would have died. Go crawl back into your holes and contemplate what you saw, today. Shortly every news media, national and local, will have a record of today’s events. They will probably air even before you get back to your bases and forts.”

“And then,” he added, “the questions will begin. Of just how much value is an army that a child can defeat? How much is being spent on National Defense that simply puts money in the pockets of the greedy? And where better could that money be applied. Good day, gentlemen.”

::Mata, take her home.::

::She’s alright. I don’t know how she did it, but even the sound didn’t reach her. Honest, she’s OK,:: Mata replied.

::It’s still got to have been a strain. Take her home. Under her own power, if she wants, but get her back to her office and let her relax,:: Ted said. ::I’ll bring Marshal and whoever he wants to have with him. We’ll have lunch and talk rationally about all this. I think I know what she’s intending, and I approve. That was quite a show, but it’s time for the star to leave the stage.::

“SQUAD! Form up,” Muriel’s voice rang out. Mata stood beside Muriel and the squad quickly formed up behind them. Then they all disappeared.

Ted, during the mental conversation, returned to Marshal and asked him if he’d like to visit Enclave for lunch and discussion. And how many people would be coming with him.

“Um . . . could I bring them all? After this, I think they deserve an opportunity to see Enclave and to make their own decisions.”

Ted grinned at him. “Of course. No problem. Get them together, and we’ll all go the same way that Muriel did.”

Muriel had brought Mata and the squad in, outside her office. She’d translated herself with no problem, and Mata was wondering where she was getting it all. Of course she had a power link, but the emotional strain must have been tremendous.

“Mata, how soon can we get a record out to the media?” Muriel asked.

"Almost immediately," Mata replied. "Why don't you sit down in the casual area. What can we get you to drink?"

"How about a soda. I feel the need for sugar and caffeine. Mata, did I come on too strong, there at the end?"

"Well, if you did then Ted trumped it by saying that you'd have been within your rights of self-defense to have killed the jerk. He even added soul death to his speech."

"Yea, I heard. Mata, I knew what was coming. So I threw up everything I had including light and sound baffles. It was so loud and bright that I could FEEL it. No, it didn't hurt me. But you know that feeling you get when there's a thunder or a lot of heavy drums? Like it's inside your body? That's what it felt like, but a hundred times stronger. And the man was gloating! That's how I spotted him. He was gloating that HE'D stopped me. I nearly blew it, then. Oh, maybe Ted wouldn't have accused me for it, but I would have. I was pulling the same trick I had at school that day. Attack by defense. And I almost killed him."

"But you didn't," Mata said. "You pulled it in. You realized what you were doing and acted responsibly. Never worry about the 'what ifs' in a case like that. That's your balance at work. You did good. You made what you did look like play. Right up to the moment that that jerk decided to remove you and the truth he couldn't face. Then. Then you showed them the panther under the pussy-cat. No, you did very well."

"Mata? . . ." Ted said.

"No, she's fine. Shook up a bit and a small case of the 'never get overs', but fine."

"How about it, Muriel. Feel like lunch?" Ted asked. And before she could say anything, he said, "Let me rephrase that. Feel like having lunch? I wouldn't want any cannibalistic jokes at my expense." That got a smile and a chuckle out of her.

"Sure! How many?" she replied.

"About twenty-five counting us. He brought his troops with him. No problem with transport. Bart had the squad bring them in as if they were a solid mass, set them down in the parking lot and told them to find spaces. They did, and we shielded the vehicles so no one could get at them. Guns, you know."

"I take it you have the Colonel and his troops stashed?"

"Yep, just waiting for us," Ted replied.

"Then let's go." And suiting actions to words, she got up and got the visual from Ted, and they left.

When they appeared, Marshal asked, "How do you keep your uniform looking so

fresh?”

“Clothing 101. We don't buy clothes. We don't spend money on washing them. They're clean, pressed as necessary and smelling fresh – which for a girl is a plus – just because we want them to. Take the training and you'll be making your own uniforms and civvies, and people will be wondering that about you, too,” Muriel said with a grin. “Have you guys ordered?”

“No,” Marshal replied. “We were waiting to see if you'd join us.”

“Well, I did, so take a look at the menus and see what appeals. This is on us, by the way. You are NOT having to figure out if you can afford something. We invited you, so you're guests. ALL of you.”

The look of relief on a few faces showed that some of the troops were worried about that. “Ma'am, I would have covered it,” Marshal said.

“I'm Muriel. I thought we got past that hurdle. Ma'am is someone I don't know. And I wouldn't hear of you having to pay when you're invited out to eat.” The manager came over and started taking orders with Ted, Muriel and Marshal. Other waiters showed up and took orders from the rest of the troops. “Besides,” she added as the manager and waiters left, “this goes on the Enclave bill, not even out of my pocket. Being an Ambassador has it's perks. In a sense the whole place is my home. Oh, and Ted's. It's purpose is to support us in what we do. And part of that is just getting people to know us.”

“Now to spook you. The manager? The waiters? The members of the squads that you saw with us? All Envoys. They're not human. I know, my squad looked like children. They can look how they like. Sometime ask Mata about it. I think you'll enjoy the joke. They are actually much older than anyone currently alive on earth. And they're fun to be with. And ALL of them can train, though some are better at it than others.”

The food arrived, and Muriel added between bites, “We can also do college courses, though we haven't been accredited, yet. Also lower school courses, which my friends and I take. And you wouldn't believe how they're done. But, like the training, you have to pass that first test, first. Come back to the office with us and you'll get an idea of what they can be like.”

“I'd like to, Muriel, but I wouldn't want to take up your time,” Marshal said.

“Bull. You're just afraid that your boss would get mad because you didn't come straight back.”

“No, actually, I called him while we waited for you. He'll authorize me and any of the troops that want to and can pass the test to take the training. And he said to take as long as it takes. If it goes beyond four days, then it goes beyond. Basically, this is the mission I'm on, and the mission takes what the mission takes. So, I'm clear any time you want to start and can fit me and whoever in.”

"That's a pretty understanding boss," Muriel said.

"Well, it's like this. He knows what you can do, and he has people around him that know even better, some of them having been with you on one of your excursions. Yea, I'd say the President's pretty understanding. I got shoved in as a lieutenant to be a spy on Havershaw and find out what was going on. I'd been with him about a month when this came up. When we found out that the Envoy Ambassadors would be there I almost broke a finger punching buttons to call him. Oh, and all the men with me are hand picked. I didn't want him to have any support if it came to trouble between you and him."

"I have a confession to make," Marshal said, changing the subject. "I tried what you did on me with the troops. They were all willing, by the way. All but three passed."

"OK, point out the three, and we'll see if another way of trying will work," Muriel said, casually.

"You mean you're not upset?"

"Well, only a little," she replied. "You don't have the strength, the power, to sustain such an effort without causing yourself one heck of a headache, and I never noticed. I'm sorry. Hold still and I'll fix it." A couple of seconds later and one serious look of relief, and she said, "were the three that didn't make it by any chance the last three that tried?"

"Why, yes! Oh, I get it. I'd run out of steam and couldn't get them."

"Yep. So, try again," Muriel said. "You've got more power now. And if you stay for the training it'll never be a problem again."

Marshal got up and walked down the length of the tables to the three at the end. A few seconds later there were three smiling faces and one shouting, "YES!" and pumping his fist. Muriel just grinned.

"Guys, I'm sorry . . .," Marshal began.

"Don't sweat it, sir. We all know from training that there're times when you just can't go any further. You just ran into a wall. I'll admit, I thought it was us, but you just cleared that all up. Thanks, sir," said the one that had shouted.

"That's the mark of a real man," Ted said, quietly. "Or woman. To immediately go to his men and try again, and apologize for HIS shortcomings. When one reaches that point, then care becomes a habit and not a responsibility. I'll trickle some power to him to top him back off, Muriel."

"They seemed to take it well. He must have hit it off with them in the right ways."

"I did," said Marshal as he seated himself again. "When I picked them I made sure that they understood that I'd expect a lot from them. But that I expected a lot from me, too. I

failed them, even though I didn't realize it. It was up to me to make it right. It's happened a couple of times before, so they know I'm always trying, and always ready to accept responsibility. They're good guys, and will go through anything I can toss at them just to stay with me."

"Well, you will lose them, eventually," Ted said.

"Yes. But by then they'll have learned what I've learned, and can pass it on to others," Marshal said.

"Well," Ted said, "let's finish lunch and see what we can do about it. Oh, and Muriel, don't worry about having enough trainers. Between three of your squads, your friends, three of my squads, Bart, Mata and I, I think we'll have it covered."

Chapter 11

Military Achievements (Saturday afternoon)

It went like clockwork. With the number of trainers and Envoys available, each person was able to get individualized training. These were dedicated and motivated men, and they plowed through their first two stripes without even thinking about it. The largest struggle, as always, being getting their clothing.

Ted had decided that the best place to pull this was his old office, which was still empty, but was large enough to hold all the troops and trainers. Muriel worked with Marshal, getting him past all the hurdles alone, except for the clothing which Ted handled. He remarked on the differences in training style, and Ted apologized for not having as much experience as Muriel did. Marshal just tossed it off as unimportant.

"Half of learning, at least, is up to the person who needs to learn. My comment wasn't a criticism of your style. Both are good. Just that they were different," he'd said.

As he packed his old uniform in the provided suitcase, he looked for a moment at the eagles on his epaulettes. "Are they going to disappear, now that I'm not wearing it?" he asked.

"Nope. Once done they remain. You can even transfer them to your current uniform if you like."

"That was real nice of that woman to do that. I take it she took the training."

"Melanie?" Ted asked. "Yea, she did it without anyone knowing. Took a vacation and flew out here to ask if it would be possible. A couple of days later she went back and arrested her direct supervisor and ended up taking over his job. Then she turned around and trained the Detail that she now heads. President's detail. Real nice person, real helpful."

"She's Secret Service?"

"Yep. I think Muriel's upbraiding Havershaw was born in the way that Melanie treated two local police, one of them a captain. I've seen a recording of that. It was impressive," Ted said.

"So, what's next?"

"Well, you'll actually get two stripes at once. So will your men. The Envoys have looked at all of you, whether you believe it or not, and you're all protectors in one way or another, as well as that being the reason that you all joined the service. That's what the second stripe is for. So, tomorrow you learn to take a walk," Ted said, grinning.

“Um, I think I learned that a while ago,” Marshal said.

“Uh, huh. But did you learn to go from one point to another without bothering with all the points in between?”

“Um, no. Not that I know of.”

“You will, tomorrow,” Ted said. “Then, if you're up to it, a trip Home. Have you told your men about it?”

“No,” Marshal said. “You think I should?”

“Well, some might not want to make the trip. Muriel's parents didn't until just recently. I think they were afraid that they'd get there and wouldn't be allowed to come back.”

“Has that ever happened?” asked Marshal.

“Well, not that I've heard of or in my experience,” Ted said. “But the trip does have it's down side. You end up facing what used to be called the 'final judgment'. It isn't, really, but it is heavyweight. You end up judging yourself, and that can be traumatic. We can see about getting soldiers to meet you and help you through it, if you like.”

“You mean people that have died?”

“Yes. People that have died. Some, maybe, in battle. No, they're not all gruesome or anything. And for the most part they're rather cheerful people. Just souls hanging around until they decide to come back to a different life. Melanie's dad was a Marine and died when she was ten. She finally went back to see him, and came back much more relaxed about Home. When Muriel took the trip the first time, she called out for a friend of hers that had died in an auto accident. That girl was there to congratulate each of her friends when they made their trips. It can make a difference. I think it's because we each judge ourselves much more harshly than others would.”

“Any chance that I could finish up, today?” Marshal asked.

“Ask Muriel. She'll know better than I do. But realize, if she says 'no', then it's final. She's a pretty good judge of what a person can take. I haven't seen her go wrong, yet. That's why I put her in charge of training.”

“Then let's get back to the office and see what she says.”

“OK, do you have a good memory? Think of what the front of her office looks like. The outside. Think about it plain, then reach out and let the reality make the rest of the image. Do you see any people around? Anyone that would get in the way of your translating there? No? Then just step forward into the image.”

And they translated. Marshal looked at the front of the building, at the whoosh doors, then looked at Ted. "You just tricked me, didn't you?"

"Yep. That's three stripes. And that's a mark in your favor. You went through that without thinking about it. Just did it."

"Yea, that's the military all over. Don't think, just do. There are times when it's the right thing. But too many other times when it's dead wrong," Marshal said. He took a deep breath and let it out. "Let's go talk to Muriel."

"So, you want to take the trip Home, huh?" Muriel said as Marshal sat down in her casual area. "Ted, how many translations has he done?"

"Just the one here," Ted replied.

"Uh, huh. Marshal, come with me." Muriel got up and walked out the whoosh doors. Marshal was right on her heels.

"I want you to think of four places you've been and think you know well enough to find. We'll fine tune taking visuals from someone else later. I want you to think of them, the order they're going to go in, then I want you to execute them in no more than one minute each. I'll be linked to you and will go to your destinations when you do. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am. Four sites. The demonstration main gate, main gate to my post, but not on the road, itself, outside Ted's old office where we got the first training, and back here," Marshal said.

"Good choices. One you know very well, two you know moderately well, and one you know because of the events, there. Ready? Go."

The demonstration site was no problem. Nor was the main gate of his post. He hesitated on the third, Ted's old office, then bypassed it and went back to Muriel's office.

"OK, why'd you abort Ted's office?" Muriel asked.

"There were people going through where we would have come out. Sorry."

"Don't be. You did exactly right. If you'd have tried, I'd have aborted the translation myself. That's why we have trainers go with you but let you do it yourself on your first solo. To see if you scan well enough to tell if there's a problem. You scanned all four, and aborted only on the one that would have been a problem," Muriel said.

"Now," she continued, "Here's the difference in translating on earth and translating to another dimension like Home." And she showed him the twist he'd have to make. "And here's the visual to build your scan from." And showed him judgment square. "This time you do it cold. I'll be linked to bail you out, if needed. So far, nobody's needed to be bailed out like that. I'll also go with you, out and back. But you'll be doing your own trip. Do YOU think

you're ready?"

Marshal thought for a long moment. Then said, "Yes. On my mark . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . MARK!" and they translated.

Ahead of Marshal was a field. An empty field with nothing growing in it. Three people stood there. Lotta raced across to Melanie and hugged her. Melanie's dad, in Marine Corps blues, saluted Marshal, then moved to Muriel.

The third figure came more slowly. He was wearing Army greens and walked up to Marshal and saluted. "Hello, Terry. Looks like you've passed the test. You look good, but MAN! I've missed you," he said.

"Jeff? My gosh. How'd you know I'd be coming," Marshal said.

"Oh, that old leatherneck over there. He's been keeping track of everyone that takes the final step. Made it is duty to meet them if no one else does. That's Melanie's dad. You know, the woman that gave you your eagles. The girl is Lotta, the one Muriel told you about. Well, anyway, that Marine found out that you were psyching yourself up to come up, and put out a call for anyone that might know you. Especially military. So, here I am."

"Yea. Here you are. But you shouldn't be," Terry said.

"Yea. I should. You didn't cause the circumstances. You didn't do it. And nothing you could have done could have stopped it. I'll admit, it took me some time and some good counseling to understand that. And to understand that I didn't do it, either. Those Envoys are GOOD counselors, man. They understand things like no one I've ever seen. Except, maybe, that little girl you came in with. With her it's instinctive."

"Look, Jeff, I gotta get back. But I'll come back here sometimes, when I get a chance. OK?"

"You bet, Terry. You bet. And let me know how things are going with you. Not the world, I can find out about that. But you, personally. Inside. Know what I mean? Oh, and that vacant lot? Used to be a hill. Had a throne on top. Gone now. You're your own judge. And I'd say you passed that, too. Makes it easier to have a friend around at times like this, doesn't it?" Jeff asked.

"Yea, it does. Thank the old man for me, will ya'?"

"Sure. But he knows. He already knows. Sometimes I think he's half Envoy, himself. Good man. Wish I'd known him when I was alive. Well, anyway, get back and get your stripes, man. And I hope you've got a gem or metal or shiny mineral in mind for your fifth stripe."

"Malachite, man. Malachite."

“Good choice. Hasn't been one yet. Terry, take care of yourself and keep your shields up.” Jeff turned around and walked back to the edge of the square. Lotta and the Marine joined him, shortly, and it looked like they were buddies.

“Ready to go back?” Muriel's quiet voice said, beside him.

“Yea. Thanks. This is quite an experience. But I think I need food and a rest. Let's go.” They translated back without all the fanfare that he'd used to get Home. And found himself surrounded by his troops. His hand was shaken, back pounded in camaraderie, and generally praised for having taken the final step.

“What gem, Marshal?” Muriel asked.

“Malachite. And it's Terry. For you, Muriel, it's always Terry. And now I understand why you only use your first name. After that, well, family is something you have and cherish, but . . . but you're you. Period. You're not your family, not your friends, not your enemies. Just you.”

“I think you understand. I could never find the words, but yes, that's what it's like. Your stripes, Colonel Terry. You earned them.”

“Now can I sit down for a couple of minutes?” he asked in a mock plaintive voice.

Muriel laughed. “Of course. Come on in and relax. You earned that, too.”

As he entered, he saw Mata at her desk, walked over, and said, “Mata, someone told me that I should talk to you about who you are.”

“Oh, dear. Ted's been mouthing off, again. OK, here's the story of my shame. First, look at me.” She stood up. “What do you see?”

“I see a twelve year old girl that I've been told is actually an Envoy.”

“I AM an Envoy. Ted went hunting people that he thought might be trainable. When he found one, he asked me if I'd find someone to train her.” Suddenly, Mata grew in height and changed gender. “I was Matthew when Ted invaded Home and took over. He started using nicknames for everyone. So Matthew became Matt. And Ted asked Matt to find him someone that wouldn't mind looking like a twelve year old girl in order to train Muriel. And then I blew it. In getting changed and translating to her side, I forgot one very important thing. My name. What would I be called? So I get there and very intelligently say, 'hi, I'm Matt . . . uh.' And the little minx ran with it. I've been Mata ever since and never regretted it. Shameful.” And they both laughed as 'he' changed back into 'she', and sat back down.

“I take it that Muriel knows about this?” Terry asked.

“Oh, that was the worst part,” said Mata. “In the course of our discussions of what Envoys were, I mentioned that we don't die and don't age. And that we don't have gender.

And that most Envoys look like guys. She suspected to the point of knowing before the evening was out. And then casually asked me if it was Matt, or Matthew when I was about to confess the truth. Oh, the perfidy. Oh, the guilt and shame. Out thought by a twelve year old human.” She put the back of her wrist to her forehead, and Terry started laughing again. And that just set them BOTH off.

“And she's like this all the time,” Mata said. “She's always upstaging us, even in bantering and teasing. Only one Envoy has managed to get a stopper on her, and he did it twice. If you've let her into your mind at all, and I know from the training that you had to have, just mention hob nailed boots. Fred really got her with that one.”

“I think I'll let that one pass. I met a friend of mine in Home. He was there to meet me, and made the situation easier.”

“Yea, and I'll bet that Melanie's dad found him and got him to show up and help out. He's been doing that, lately. I think Caleb is teaching him. Oh, Caleb is an Envoy that took it upon himself to meet the newly dead and help ease their transition.”

“Does anybody do it from this side?” asked Terry. “Oh, sorry, my father was a funeral director and my mother a nurse. Kinda makes you think of things, you know?”

“No, no one has, yet. But now that we've got the idea we'll see what we can do. Maybe set up a Hospice, here. Oh, and that's another thing. Humans are inventive. Envoys aren't, unless prodded. Thanks for the prod. I'll make sure that goes in your record as the one to suggest it. It'll make Ted happy. Muriel, too.”

Terry wandered into Muriel's office and sat across from her in the casual area. “So, where do I eat, tonight.”

“Anywhere you like. No restaurant will charge you or your troops. Them, because they're trainees and you because you passed. Besides, you're our guest, and guests don't pay,” said Muriel.

“Oh, and one other thing,” said Ted. “Check your 'no pocket' for a little green booklet. Terry did, and found the Home passport with his name and picture inside.

“Oh, wow. You weren't kidding about the certificate,” he said.

“Nope. Now you're certified. Bet you didn't know that you were certifiable,” Ted said with a straight face.

“Then you've never been in the military. We're ALL certifiable,” Terry straight-lined back. And they all cracked up.

“You know,” Mark said, wandering into the office and sitting next to Terry, “they say that laughter is good for you. But too much can rupture something. At least I don't have to worry about it damaging Ted's heart. He doesn't have one.”

“Hi, Mark. I love you, too,” said Ted.

“Ted,” Mark said, solemnly, “you’re not my type.”

“Of course not,” Ted replied with as much seriousness. “I’m human. And you’re not even the pale shade of your former self. You had no former self.”

Mark chuckled, then said, “Actually, we don’t know that. Too far back in history, and we lost a lot over the interim. Being made into slaves feeding energy to that thing was bad enough. But he kept changing our history and deleting parts of it. We may never recover what we actually were. Not that I’m worried. I’m having too much fun.”

“Oh, by the way, Terry. The idea of building a hospice here was a good idea. I’ve got some people . . . well Envoys . . . that might be interested in starting it. It could sure make the transition of some a lot easier. Thanks.”

“Wait a minute. I just asked Mata if there was a way to do, here, what Caleb and Melanie’s dad are doing in Home. SHE came up with the idea of a Hospice.”

“No, she says that you kick-started the idea, so you’re stuck with it,” Muriel said.

“I’m going to start keeping my ideas to myself,” Terry replied.

And a whole room full of Envoys and children chorused, “GOOD LUCK WITH THAT!”

And Mata had to clean off her screen. Again.

Chapter 12

The Comedy of Errors (Sunday)

Sunday brought the completion of Terry Marshal's troops training. In the morning they did the pop-corn thing of bouncing around all over Enclave. Terry joined them, getting in more practice, himself. Sunday afternoon the troops took their trip Home, one at a time and accompanied by an Envoy. To be sure that their trip wasn't a complete downer, as Terry had heard had happened to some people, he elected to go Home first, and be there to salute and greet them. He was joined by Melanie's dad and an ever changing group of men in Army greens. His troops never knew what hit them. They were greeted and welcomed like long lost friends, which in some cases was actually true, and got over the shock of judgment rather quickly.

Then Muriel pulled a fast one on him. She gave the troops the option of having a real, live Ambassador and co-leader of Home give them their stripes, or have Terry do it. They all opted for Terry, and even selected the same Malachite to use as their braid, with the understanding that they could change it in the future if they wished. Terry was nervous at first, but by the end he was joking about how his men were overworking him. And his men laughed right along with him.

When the stripes were all administered, Melanie brought the President in, and he congratulated them on being the first of the armed forces to receive the training, and how that would make a different unit of them. Melanie had obviously coached him on just what it meant to have the training, and how it changed one's outlook. Muriel told them that they were free to train anyone that could pass the first test on their own, and that if they needed help, or just wanted someone to supervise until they were comfortable with it, that they could call on her at any time, and she'd send someone out. That caused backs to straighten even more and grins to appear.

The President, himself, told them not to report back to the post until Tuesday or Wednesday. That there was nothing that important that had to be done. He also added that various charges of corruption and financial irregularities were being lodged against Havershaw, and that he likely wouldn't see daylight again as he was being tried by a military court martial. And that brought a cheer. The men had uniformly despised his attitude and behavior, and were happy to see his back as it moved farther and farther away from them.

Muriel, on the other hand, finally got a chance to see the demonstration as others had seen it, and was amazed that she had looked so poised and in control, even at the end. She also got a chance to see what the media did with it. The arms manufacturers were cast in a very bad light, and there was talk about suing them for the extravagance of the expenditures necessary to keep their greed fed. Many high ranking officers found themselves voluntarily

resigning their commissions or being court martialed for financial crimes and wrong-doing that they committed. Previous wars and current conflicts were being examined to see what the actual cause was, and it was felt that there could be charges lodged against some politicians, even current ones.

Changes were also being made in Congress concerning what constituted a valid bill, and various riders were being dropped as not applying to the purpose of the bill, itself. Lawyers were finding it harder to get elected to a political office of any sort, as much of the Congressional behavior seemed to stem from them. And laws were being written that could actually be read and understood by someone with a tenth grade education.

Two things had prompted all these changes. The first was the discovery of the amount of corruption that was going on in the Defense budget. The second was the fact, just being whispered about, that the President was forming a new unit with Envoy training that could go in and stop a war without firing a shot. The leak about the President's special unit had, of course, ultimately come from the White House, but so far no one had managed to track it back that far. Some talking heads had suggested that it was made up of Envoys, which was raising concern about an Envoy invasion. But others scoffed at such an idea. After all, Envoys were non-violent.

"What is going on, here?" Muriel asked.

"Right off hand, I'd say we got caught up in an underground movement that the President or his people started," Ted said. "He's wanted to examine Defense for a long time, ever since certain things started coming to light. Long before he was elected. Hammers that cost 400 times what one would pay at a hardware store, that were no better than what one would find in such a store, and sometimes were made by the same manufacturer. The constant rise in the cost of fielding an army, despite the lower number of army personnel each year. The proliferation of small wars all over the world, wars that were fueled by arms from American based manufacturers. And not all of those arms were stolen and shipped to those countries."

"A few other things that disturbed him," he went on. "Like not being allowed to know what was actually in the Defense budget. 'Oh, it's secret, you know, so the enemy doesn't know what we're doing!' It would appear that, to the Defense Department, America was the enemy. So, he's been nibbling at this for a long time. But to be made to look foolish by a child caused some military and a lot of arms manufacturers to try to do some very stupid things. Anger can do that to some people. The military was calling for the outlawing of anyone with Envoy training, starting with the Envoys. The arms manufacturers were calling for the expulsion of Envoys from the country and the severe regulation of anyone with Envoy training – what amounted to an arrest and conviction of being subversive without a trial and the opportunity to have our side of it heard. The fact that who these people wanted muzzled like that were twelve years old didn't sit well with some of the people on the hill."

"So, investigations were started," Ted paused and took a drink of that grape and berry combination that the Envoys seemed to love. "Those investigations were going on long before we decided to show up the military and arms manufacturers. Our part in it just blew

the lid off the pressure cooker and gave the President the opportunity to act earlier than we all thought.”

“So, I was just a pawn in someone else's game?” asked Muriel.

“Yes and no,” Ted said, which infuriated Muriel. She hated answers that started with that. “Nothing is that simple. You were a distraction to those that wanted to keep wars going for their profit. But you were moving fast. Faster than anyone anticipated. You trained children, and people laughed and said, 'oh, how sweet.' Then you trained a Secret Service officer, and SHE moved fast, and suddenly there was a trained group of adults protecting the President. Then a State Trooper, and HE added to the mix with his own group of trainees. All getting the same training that the children got, and all being quite successful in what they did because of that training. Nothing is scarier to a criminal than a police officer that can't be bought or corrupted, and can't be killed.”

“The President had seen an opportunity to get closer to what was going on in the Defense Department, so he put Marshal in to see if he could find out anything,” Ted added, reflectively. “That must have been a couple of months ago, before you were even trained. Marshal managed to cherry-pick a detail to 'protect' Havershaw. They got some information on Havershaw, and who his contacts were, just recently. I was supposed to go in and see if I could gather more information while you distracted them. Well, you did that. You also made them look foolish, and managed to bottle up Havershaw all by yourself.”

“Now, before you go getting mad at me,” Ted said with a grin, “there's no point in all this where you were led. Nothing in any of your actions was prompted by me. You have always acted as you, based on your own background and new-found abilities. Heck, I couldn't have led you into anything if I'd wanted to. You were always too far ahead of me. The Envoys saw it, though, shortly after your first action of putting down the Secretary of State. Just the fact that you existed and were trained almost guaranteed that sooner or later you would stumble on something like Defense. All the rest of us could do was hang on tight and try to ride out the storm.”

“That's what's scaring me, now. We're in the middle of the storm, Muriel. No, you didn't cause it, you just made it obvious that it was coming. You also changed it's target. At least from what I can see. Originally, the target was the President. You've just made it you, your friends, and anyone with Envoy training including the Envoys, themselves. No, I'm not worried about any of them. The protections they've got are too good, as you showed in that demonstration. But public opinion is a nasty thing. We're going to see a lot of it, trying to show us as the bad guys and cut us off from the rest of society. There will also be some backlash. More people will want to be trained. You're apt to be rather busy.”

“So, let's see if I've got this right. State's move on bottling up my friends and I in a school for bullies was because somebody saw that a certain type of person could result in a loose cannon that couldn't be stopped and couldn't be led?” Muriel asked.

“A bit simplistic, but true in essence. It's also why you were made an Ambassador so quickly, and then a co-leader. It was the Renegades that pushed State into being so foolish.

And it was the Envoys, realizing the same things, that pushed me to make you co-leader. And they were right. Just by being you and being trained you made a difference. A big difference, and they saw it coming. The Renegades panicked, which is never the thing to do in a crisis situation. As you know.”

“Yea,” Muriel said. “Act first. Panic later, when you have the time. Except that, when you have the time to panic you no longer need to.”

“Exactly. And that's what you did. You may have been tense at times, rocked by events. But you acted instead of panicking. You dealt with what was, then let the emotions wash through you afterward. And you taught your friends to be the same way. Fran with her abduction. Don, dealing with something that no one had seen despite the chance that he could have been killed by it. Others, like the way they behaved during that accident cleanup. Melanie and the way she operates. Or Tex. Your parents are just plain refreshing. They've got the training, but aren't activists like you. They're just relaxing and enjoying life.”

“Who says we're not activists,” Fred White said, entering Muriel's office.

“Darned straight, we are,” said Lily. “It's just that our activity isn't in a direction you see. How many old people do you see out there. How many are made helpless and toothless due to age and limited income. Guess who we've been working on. Guess where some of the information about Defense came from. Or the arms manufacturers. It takes a lot of people to support those at the top. And not all of those people were happy. And some of them had information that led to other information that lead to Well, you get the point.”

“Lily and I have been feeding information gathered from our friends that were still in the business, and from their friends, and so forth. We've been passing it on to whoever looked like they might stand a chance of doing something about it. The President was one, back before he was a Congressman. And along with the information, we were feeding him an idea of how the American people felt about things. We were doing this long before Lily got sick. And that took our finger off the button, so to speak. That's why you, Muriel, ended up in that school and we didn't realize what was happening.”

“Well,” Lily said, “that's over with. And my doctor can't believe that I'm cured. That form of Cancer is supposed to be terminal, even if it's slow moving. Only I don't have it any more, thanks to Mark.”

“And I don't have that problem I had,” Fred added. “And now we've got the training and the ability to go anywhere we want. So we have. Remaking old contacts and gathering more information. And passing it on up to those that could use it. Those we KNEW were clean. Introducing us to Melanie and Tex just made it easier to get information out. We could just send it to them without anyone knowing that they were our contacts upward.”

“So, now that the lid is off this particular pressure cooker, I've got a tough decision,” Ted said. “I can see us getting an influx of people wanting training, and that's going to tie up the Guest House. But I don't want to stop visitors from coming here.”

“So, you add onto the Guest House, much the way my office was added onto. And you create a Visitors Hotel next to it. Increase the staff some, and they should be able to work either side, depending on where the major amount of people is at the time,” said Muriel.

“A Visitors Hotel. Next to and actually part of the Guest House. Yes, that might work. And we've got trainers, thanks to you. And of both genders, and we've learned how to deal with cross-gender problems,” Ted said. “And expanding the Guest House would give us a training area in what used to be the conference room. That never worked out the way we had planned, so it ended up being dead space. But not large enough to really work for a training area. Now, it can be. It can even be divided up, the way you did with your friends in your apartment, to handle mixed gender groups.”

“And it doesn't stop my handling individual trainees. I do see one problem, though. We're going to need to increase the size of the security on the kids. At least a squad of Envoys each, to give them backup in training,” Muriel said.

“Um. Maybe we could help,” Lily said. “Um”

“Out with it, mom. You've been training people, haven't you.”

“Um . . .” and Ted and Muriel laughed. “They don't have stripes,” Lily said. “We didn't know how to do that.”

“So, bring them in, show them Enclave and where you live . . . ,” Ted started.

“Oh, dear. And the house is a mess,” Lily said, and Ted and Muriel laughed, and were joined by Fran.

“Bring them in,” Ted said. “By the time that they're here Fran and your security detail can have the place spotless. We can put them up in the Guest House, as soon as Marshal goes, which should probably be Monday afternoon. So send out the invitations for Tuesday, and show them around. And when you 'just happen' to come by your daughter's office, we can apply the stripes and show you how to do it.”

“You . . . you mean we didn't do something wrong?” Lily asked.

“No, mom. The training is meant to be out there. We could have helped, if we'd known. So you bring them in, we'll check them out and make sure they've got all the information and experience they need and apply the stripes. Or rather, have you and dad apply the stripes. You deserve to be able to do that,” Muriel said. Lily blushed, smiling.

“Isn't it amazing, Muriel, how much like kids adults can be at times?” Ted asked with a smile.

“Isn't it amazing, Ted, how much like adults kids can be at times?” Muriel asked with a grin. Then they both laughed.

"No, mom, you didn't do anything wrong. I'd bet that Fran helped you and dad a lot in the training, and that she and your squad were the ones to go with the ones who wanted to take the trip Home. Doesn't matter. You and dad were the ones that wanted to help them and protect them. So you're the ones 'responsible' for their training. And I think you've found out a little of why I feel I have to do this. Why I have to be a trainer, an Ambassador, and whatever else I am. It's kinda like a need. And that's why you should be the ones to give your friends their stripes. Why you should be the ones to show off yours. And I'd be more than happy to meet your friends, if they'd like to meet a twelve year old Ambassador, or your 'famous' daughter," Muriel had been smiling gently through all this, and at the end turned it into an ironic grin. "After all, you've earned it."

"All right," Lily said. "But can we bring them in in smaller groups? Maybe five at a time, or thereabouts?"

"Sure, if you want to," Muriel said. "I'd have thought you'd want to get them all done at once."

"Um. No, there's quite a few of them. We didn't train them all at once, either. Besides, they can't all take the time off at the same time."

"Uh, mom? How many are there?"

"Oh, about fifty, I think," Lily said. "Unless Fred added some to that."

Muriel covered her face. Then said, "Ted, I think we've got the wrong person as Ambassador of training for Home. She's obviously better at this than I am."

"Oh, no, dear," Lily said. "We just have more people we know than you know about, and they have even more that they know. And it all just kind of snowballed."

"May I ask," Ted said, "just where you're finding all these people?"

"Oh, well, we belong to a church group, you know. Oh, not for religious reasons. No, we're there because of the people, the socialization. Then, of course, there's the club that Fred belongs to, as well as our circle of friends. A couple of charities. It's all older people, you know. Just us old fogies that have nothing better to do with their lives."

"Uh, huh" said Ted, "and, of course, THEY know people, who know Oh boy. I can see where this is going."

"Yea," said Muriel, "We've got a lot of people we need to teach how to apply stripes. As well as let them know that they can teach, and we're willing to back them up. And we've still got the kids in school to worry about getting trained. IF we can ever get their parents permission, that is."

Terry Marshal walked in at that moment, and seeing a lull in the conversation, said, "Some of the guys remembered that you talked about college courses. Do you have any?"

"Hi, Terry," Muriel said. "I know we've got through grade twelve, so far. I don't know about the college courses, yet. I DO know that the committee hasn't managed to convince anyone that we should be accredited, yet. I think they have to have the syllabus for the various disciplines, first. Mata?"

"Ask Betty. She's being very closed mouthed, lately. I think she's up to something. It's all just very un-Envoy-like. I think she's trying to pull a fast one on them. And maybe on us, too," Mata said.

::Betty? Can you come here a minute?::

::Sure, Muriel,:: She sent. "What's up," she said as she translated in.

"What's the status on the college courses?"

"Oh, I wish you hadn't asked that question. OK, I'll confess. What we've got are parallel courses right now. Those that suit standard education practices, and those that work for those that are trained. So far, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Math, Social Sciences including sociology and psychology, History, Business, both electrical and mechanical Engineering and Liberal Arts. We're trying to get the mainline courses accepted for accreditation, so people can get degrees. But we're running into a brick wall. They want us to have a campus and required hours in class, and stuff like that."

"Oh, really! Well, there are accredited colleges and universities that don't have such things. It's all done on line except for any lab work. And in those cases, they've got arrangements with various places across the country to do the lab work at local facilities. Often two year colleges and high schools. Let me have the names of the people you have to contact. Maybe I can 'influence' them," Muriel said. "By the way, where am I at, now?"

"Well, technically, you've graduated high school. In actuality, the dumps we gave you were a bit more 'in depth' than that. You could probably take the college level tests and pass them and have a Bachelor's by now."

"And the other kids?" Muriel asked.

"The same, or very close to it. They started a bit later than you did. They may need one more dump."

"And why wasn't I informed of all this?"

"Well," Betty said, "we were hoping to have the accreditation before we told you about this. Um . . . but we hit a snag. They say that getting a college education shouldn't be dependent on some ridiculous test. In other words, they object to our testing for a mental link before we train people, or feed them the college courses. They also say that our courses haven't proven themselves. In other words, they want us to teach in the old fashioned way, and only use the material that they 'suggest'. All of which, by the way, is outdated or just plain

wrong.”

::Mark? How are you doing getting Home style medicine accepted?::

::Not well, Muriel. Same problem that Betty has. If it isn't done their way, then it isn't acceptable.::

::OK, thanks.::

“Ted, we're going about this the wrong way. Their material and methods can never be aligned with ours, and they're going to make sure that it stays that way. I think the problem is that they treat education as another commodity that they can make money from. Have you seen what some of these colleges and universities are charging for tuition? And that doesn't count all the other fees. I think we need to set up our own accreditation, then ask them to meet our standards.”

“Do you have any idea what you're asking?” Ted asked.

“Yep. We make them prove that they are up to our standards.” And her face took on a particularly gleeful, evil look.

“Betty, you're going to have a bunch of students, shortly,” Muriel said. “They're all trained. They've even gotten Mark's battlefield first aid dump. So, now, we're going to give them the college degree of their choice by mental link, but it's going to be OUR series of courses, except for things that actually are established like History or Art. How fast can you put it together? And in the mean time I'll pressure the boss to set up a University of Colleges of Home, or some such inflated and obnoxious title.”

Betty giggled. “OK. Then when? Yesterday? We've even got one for Medicine, thanks to Mark. Two years and you can have multiple degrees in wildly differing fields. And that's at what, here, would be considered the PHD level.”

“Good. Terry, tell your men to get in touch with Betty, here, for enrollment. I'll start working on setting up the University, otherwise known as obfuscation and blather and marketing. We'll get the accreditation through the marketplace, by showing that our schooling is better than theirs and more practical. Ted, you're sitting there making 'fish gasping for air' faces again. What's wrong?” asked Muriel.

“Oh, nothing. Just trying to figure out how a twelve year old girl can be chancellor of a University. You're going to need a bigger window.”

“A bigger window?” Muriel asked.

“Yea. Your title sign is about to expand some,” he said, and grinned. “Let's see, 'Chancellor of the University of Home, College of . . .' and that long list of disciplines as well as the Envoy training. Oh, and Marshal of the Forces of Home – that demonstration really tweaked some noses – and just to tweak some other noses, Mother Superior of the Envoys.”

“I think we can leave that last out. We'd have too many people referring to me as a 'real mother',” she replied, dryly, but with a grin. “OK, people, let's get it on.”

Chapter 13

Truth and Fiction

(Monday)

Monday morning saw a new sign on Muriel's window:

Ambassador
Muriel
Home Co-Leader
Chancellor of
the University of Home
Marshal of
the Forces of Home

“Grrr! That man!” Muriel said as she saw it. “Next thing, we’ll be at war. Marshal of the Forces of Home, indeed! I’ll marshal him! TED! GET YOUR BUTT IN HERE!”

“Oh, now,” he said, translating into her office. “How many people can have an army that never fires a shot and still defeats the enemy. Besides, it gives you rank.”

“I took a shower. And I’m NOT interested in fighting anyone. Ambassador, OK. Home co-leader, well that’s stretching it a bit. Chancellor? Come on. I’m not qualified. But Marshal is OUT!”

“No, it’s very much in. You are the co-leader, whether you realize it or not. Chancellor is just a fancy title for the person in charge. I don’t expect you to know everything, but you’re the guiding influence so you should get the title. And marshal,” Ted said, “well, you’ve shown them what one person can do against armed might. Though I must say that tipping the tanks over end-wise WAS a bit much. I think that’s what caused them to go around the bend. You did it so slowly and delicately that no one was injured inside, and the tank was even able to be restarted once it was righted. You just threw out everything they’d ever learned about warfare. Giving you the rank of Marshal puts you one up on the highest rank that any of them have.”

“Who’s going to take a twelve year old girl serious in any of those positions?” she asked.

"Me. For one," Ted said. "ALL the Envoys for another. The President of the United States. And anyone smart enough to realize that the dynamics have just changed, dramatically," Ted replied. "You've become the public face of Enclave and Home. You're the one they think of, now, when they think of any of us. I tried to do things by diplomacy and talk. And more talk. You simply went out and showed people, without being dramatic about it. Often with humor. At least one group of religions talk about children leading. And you do. You lead by example. 'Lead from the front' is the usual term for it. And people eat it up. They follow your examples, and look where that's gotten us. Police forces are using the Envoy techniques. Retired people are getting involved in a way they've never been able to, before. Children are coming to us for training and education. Even the military is coming to us."

"Muriel," Ted said, "you've done more in a short period of time than I've been able to even conceive of in two years. The mouse that spoke quietly and was heard by everyone. You deserve those titles, and maybe many more."

"You DO realize, don't you, that you're out of your mind."

"I never let that stop me," Ted said. "And you've shown me that I was tame compared to you. You're outrageous. But it works. When people come here, they don't come to see me. They come to see you. And that's fine with me. They come. That's all I care about."

Outside, Muriel could see Fran just coming toward the doors. Muriel was about to contact her when she was stopped by a civilian and asked, "Are you Ambassador Muriel? I must talk with you. It's a matter of some importance."

"No," said Fran, "but I can take you to her."

"See?" said Ted.

"Muriel," Fran said as they came in, "someone here to see you."

"You're Muriel? Oh, good. I've got to know! Where are you from?" the man said.

"Here," replied Muriel.

"You're from Enclave?"

"No, I'm from this city. I was born here," Muriel replied.

"Envoys are born? Oh, I must make a note of this!"

"Whoa, slow down. Let's start with who you are and who you represent. Then maybe we can make sense to each other."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Bret Hawkins. I'm from the Society for the Advancement of Extraterrestrials. We've been trying for weeks to get to see you," Hawkins said.

"That's extremely unlikely, or you'd have seen me before," Muriel said.

"Nonetheless, we have. Car breakdowns, wrong train, shortage of funds. I finally caught a ride with a trucker and just got here. It's been awful. Just awful. Now, really, I must know everything about you Envoys, so I can take the information back to my group," he said.

"Well, first of all," Muriel said, "not all of us are Envoys. Yes, there are lots of them around, but, for instance, I'm not an Envoy. I'm a human and a citizen of this country."

"Well, then, where is the Envoy Muriel. The one that's the Ambassador?" Hawkins said.

"You're making assumptions of things that don't exist," Muriel said, pulling her passport out of her 'no pocket' and showing it to him. "I'm Muriel. I'm human. And I'm the Ambassador. Look for yourself."

"But, I thought Enclave was for the Envoys. That's what everyone told me."

"Enclave is for the People of Home. The Envoys are People of Home. But so am I, because of the things I've learned, the things I've done, and the fact that I went there and came back under my own power," Muriel said. Ted, by this time, was doing a poor job of trying to keep from laughing. "There are several of us that have been made Citizens of Home. It's the last stage in the training we've taken."

"Ah, yes. The training. I've had some of it, myself, but I just haven't managed to go from place to place the way you do. It's why I'm here. Oh, and of course, I MUST get to your planet and see it's wonders. If you'd just show me to your space-craft, then I'm sure it would be no trouble to take me there."

::Don, I've got a job for you. But I want you to be gentle with this faker::

::Just say when, boss. I'll be good::

"Mr. Hawkins, I think you have an entirely wrong idea of who I am, who the Envoys are, and what our training is. So, let's start with one of the more basic things. I want you to build a shield. Let me know when you're ready."

"Why, I always keep one around myself. I can tell you're not the real Ambassador, or else you'd know that."

Muriel didn't wait. She just sent the signal to Don, and he struck. It wasn't as hard as he did in testing. In fact, it was doubtful that it would raise a bruise. But it made solid contact with Hawkins and startled him.

"WHAT! Little boy, why did you hit me?" Hawkins said.

"Mister," Don said, "You're not shielded. No matter what you believe. This," he said as

he swung hard at Muriel and the bat stopped and stayed there, “this is a shield. Notice that I’m not holding the bat? Notice that it never touched her? I don’t know who or what you are, or what you think you are, but you’ve never had any training in Envoy techniques. I know. I’m a trainer.”

“What? Why, that’s outrageous. No little boy could have had the time to gain the extensive training it takes to become an Envoy, much less the experience to be a trainer,” Hawkins said.

“Mr. Hawkins,” Muriel said with some exasperation, “come with me.”

“Where are we going? I’ve hardly gotten any sense out of you, whoever you are. And I really must see the real Ambassador.”

“I have something to show you that will answer most of your questions,” she said, while thinking, *and maybe drive some sense into your stupid head*. “We’re going to take a short trip. That one you wanted to take. I’m going to take you to Home.” She took hold of his arm and translated.

“Hi, Caleb,” Muriel said as they came out in front of the vacant field.

“How . . . Where am I . . . How’d we get here?”

“Mr. Hawkins, this is Home. Caleb happens to be an Envoy. He, and others like him meet with those that are newly dead and just arrived. In front of you is where there used to be a hill. This, Mr. Hawkins, is the place of judgment, where the dead come to be judged. And the Envoys care for them, sooth the shock of death, and help them gain balance and get trained, at least those that want to return. A few humans have managed to come here under their own power, without having to die first.”

“And Muriel,” Caleb said, “was the first of those. And the most balanced person I’ve seen. I didn’t train her. That was her Security Chief that did that, and ended up getting trained in the process. The first Envoy that actually learned something new. Muriel is our Ambassador to anywhere she wants to go. She’s also the co-leader of Home and the Envoys because of what she’s taught us, how she treats us. She’s ended up being our protector and teacher. Now, I’m sure you want to make up something fanciful and far out about this experience. Please don’t. We don’t need lies about us cluttering up what Muriel is trying to do. The reality is MUCH more entertaining than your fictions.” and Caleb turned and walked away.

Another figure had entered the square and now walked toward Hawkins. “Bret, are you still spouting that garbage about extraterrestrials and stuff?”

“Martha? But you’re”

“Dead? Yes, of course. When are you going to get it through your head that your fantasies are only good as entertainment? They have nothing to do with reality. And your

exaggerations have finally caught up with you. You've managed to insult Muriel any number of times until she finally showed you that fantasies were all they were. Her friend, Don, really is a trainer. And a good one. Maybe better than she is, I don't know. I couldn't judge that. But I do know that he saved the life of his first trainee, and did it alone. Muriel's been here many times and has friends here. Friends she never knew when they were alive. And she's respected by everyone. Go back, Bret. Go back and really learn." Then she turned and walked away.

"Martha?"

"Time to go back, Mr. Hawkins," Muriel quietly said. "Now you know. Home isn't a planet. It's what some people would call a pocket dimension. And it's where humans go when they die. It's the size of the universe we inhabit, but in another dimension. Envoys aren't TRAINED to do what they do. They ARE what they do. Humans have to be trained. And it isn't easy, but it doesn't take long. We allow four days for the training. Nobody has taken that long, yet." And Muriel translated them back to her office and led Hawkins to one of the chairs in the casual area.

"Mr. Hawkins, this isn't a game," Muriel said. "This isn't one of your conspiracy theory things. This is real life. And what we do affects real people. Nobody hid the Envoys from the government or the people. When Ted set up Enclave he did it right out in the open. Buying the land, outright. Paying ahead on the taxes for one hundred years, getting the paperwork done for him to be recognized as an Ambassador, and getting Enclave declared an Embassy. I understand that setting up the streets, the utilities and such took a week. Building took another week, and the wall was first just to define the area of the property, though the property actually extends out into the parking lot. The only vehicles allowed in here are Embassy vehicles."

"And they were here for two years with almost no visitors, despite the fact that it was advertised and the general public was invited to come look, shop, talk to real live Envoys, and in general enjoy the hospitality. During that time, Ted was looking for humans that would be able to take the training."

"Yea," said Ted. "And I was going about it the wrong way, though I didn't know it until I met Muriel. Literally stumbled on her while trying to help out a school system find out what was wrong with a school. And she ended up training herself, in a sense. She had an Envoy that oversaw it, and told her what needed to be done and roughly how. And she took it from there. It finally got through to us, when she trained her friends, that humans are really different."

"They each do things in their own way, which means they each learn in their own way, too. And Muriel made differences right off the bat," he went on. "Changing the way we did things, changing the attitude we had toward each other, creating new ways of using the basic techniques that the Envoys teach. She was made an Ambassador in her first day of training. She became the co-leader of Home and the Envoys shortly after because of the influence she had on everyone, and the way she handled situations. Twelve years old, and she was outdoing us old dogs and teaching us new tricks. She still is."

"She's trained people so well that they can go out and train others. She's initiated other training techniques, too, like general schooling and now college courses for degrees. And as she learned how to train others, that information got passed back to the Envoys so that any of them can use the techniques, and do. Her parents were trained by their security chief, without Muriel even knowing." Ted shook his head. "She's trained a Secret Service officer that went on to take over the detail and train them. In one day. One of her friends learned so much that he was able to train a State Police officer. That was a dicey situation that could have killed him – killed them both – and the kid got them both through it. He's the one that showed you that you didn't have any shields."

"Be thankful that you were tested that way. Muriel had a squad of Envoys shoot at her from ten feet away. Her father still has the five bullets she picked out of her shield. She thinks. She acts, sometimes more like an adult than most adults act. We have had more visitors and guests in the past few weeks than we had in the two years before she came, because she isn't afraid of a challenge. She refined the training that I thought would take a year down to three or four tests, two acknowledgments, and a bunch of basic tricks that anyone with the basic training can do. And all based on one simple test that many people can't pass. And if they can't pass the test they can't take the training. It all depends on the ability needed to pass the first test. And even that is taught."

"Wha . . . what is the test," Hawkins asked.

"You have to be able to make a mental link with your trainer," Ted said. "Look at me, Hawkins. Come on, look at me. Don't think of anything else, just me – my face, my head, my shoulders – just look. See how far away I am from you. You could almost reach out and touch me, but not quite. See the distance between us. Now close your eyes. Pretend your mind has a hand and an arm. But it's longer than your physical arm. See it in your mind. See your hand, how you can flex the fingers, how you can turn the hand over. Now reach out with it and tap me on the shoulder."

::??::

::Yes, you can get real training,:: Ted sent back.

"If you wish, the next time Don swings his bat at you, you'll never feel it. It'll never touch you. If you're not afraid of a little work, that is, and maybe a couple of days staying here," Ted said.

"Um, I don't think I can afford it," Hawkins said, dejectedly.

"You have a return ticket to your home?"

"Well, yes, of course."

"IF you take the training, then you can just turn it in for a refund. You won't need it. And the training is free, as is your room and board. The moment you passed that test you

became a guest of Enclave. And either my security chief or Muriel's is already making arrangements for you to stay in Guest House for as long as it takes for you to be trained and be comfortable with it."

"I'm . . . I . . . I'll need to make a call, and let people know I'm alright and going to stay for a couple of days," Hawkins said. Muriel handed him her phone.

"Use this. I'm on the Enclave account, because I'm an Ambassador. That way the call won't cost you anything. Ted and I can leave, if you like. Or just create a sound-proof barrier around you so we can't hear what you say."

"Uh, no. That's alright. You saw my wife in Home, so you know I don't have any family to worry about me. No, these are just some friends. And if I can reach the first one, he'll let the rest know." He dialed the number, and a few seconds later talked to someone about the fact that he was staying to get trained for real. He'd tell them all about it when he got back. And asked if they'd still have their Thursday night meeting. He said he'd meet with them then. He hung up and handed Muriel back the phone. "Thank you. I'm sorry. I treated you rather shabbily, and you've been nothing but patient and kind to me. Why?"

"Why not. You were confused and didn't understand. Now that you do there's no problem," Muriel said. "You're not the worst person we've trained here. And you weren't a bully, demanding things you couldn't have and would be bad for the country and the world. Just confused from trying to use too much logic. I think you're over that, now. So, let's take you to lunch, then get your training started. We can have at least half of it done today, and finish up whatever is left tomorrow morning. Then rest, and let it settle in. Ask questions, see the sights, talk to real Envoys, like Caleb. Then, when you're comfortable with it, you can go home and show off for your friends and see if any of them can pass the first test."

"Will you want them to come here for the training?" he asked.

"That's up to you. You'll always be able to contact us. The first couple of times it might be good to have help. And, of course, the first couple of times it might be good to have an Envoy with you when you teach them to translate – go from one place to another," Muriel said.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to be your trainer," Ted said. "I haven't had much chance to do it. In fact, I'd ask Muriel to look over my shoulder and make suggestions and correct my mistakes. Since she came to Enclave, she's been either the trainer or in charge of the training. I've only done it once."

"You? But don't you have important stuff to do?"

"Training is about the most important thing we do. So, other than an emergency or something that's time critical, that makes you the most important thing, right now. Let's go to lunch. There's a new restaurant that's just opened up that I want to try," Ted said.

Chapter 14

Juggling Chickens (Tuesday)

Monday evening found Bret powered up, protected, dressed in a better fitting and feeling suit and shoes, and trained in translating on earth. Discussion was held concerning whether or not he qualified as a protector, It was decided that, even though he was wrong in a lot of his assumptions, he was trying to do the best he could for himself, his friends, and the country in general. So, Tuesday morning found him with three stripes on his sleeves. Muriel had him practicing around Enclave a bit to be sure he realized why one had to scan the area one was going into before translating.

The last one they did he balked. "There's someone in the doorway. No, someones. Plural. They look like they're waiting for something."

"Uh, huh. Probably my parents with some of their friends. Look around the area and find a space that can hold both of us," Muriel said.

"No such place close."

"OK, you key off me, this time. We'll land in my office. Just follow my image and placement, and you'll be alright. Be ready to go, and I'll trigger the translation." Muriel used the bell sound to alert her parents to the fact that she was coming in, and where she'd be. So her parents and their friends were facing the window when Muriel appeared with Bret.

"Hi, mom," she said, going through the whoosh doors. "Sorry, I was taking Bret on an excursion of Enclave, giving him some extra practice in translating."

"It's all right," her mother said. "Ted just got through checking everyone over to make sure they were comfortable with their new-found abilities. He said he'd be right back out."

"So how do you want to do this. You want to do one group and dad another, and which one goes first."

"Well," her father said, "Lily thought, maybe, we could split the first group up, and each take half. That way we'd have the technique. Then switch off on the groups for practice."

"Good idea. OK, I'll show you both how to do it, then you can fight over who goes first," Muriel said, with a grin. She linked with both of them and was surprised to find how strong they both were. How to apply the stripes, even in the semi-hidden form that civilians used, and how to apply the braid, allowing the individuals to apply the gem, mineral or metal themselves wasn't difficult. Actually, the hardest part was telling them how to move the stripes around to suit their wardrobe.

"Ah, the wayward daughter has returned, I see," Ted said, coming out of his office.

"Yep. Just teaching my parents bad habits. After all, isn't that what kids are for?" Muriel responded.

"WHAT? You mean all these years I had it wrong? I thought they were meant to do all the chores and wait on their parents hand and foot," Ted responded.

"Hmm," Muriel said. "I think I know why you never had any kids. They all ran off as infants." By this time her mothers friends were chuckling to themselves over the by-play. "So, boss, I just showed them how it's done. You want to act as monitor?"

"Naw, I'm feeling lazy, today . . . , " Ted began.

"Today?" Muriel asked, sweetly.

"Yep, just like yesterday and the day before. I'll let you do the work. Us old people have to conserve our energy, after all."

"OK, gramps," Muriel said. "So, you two, who goes first, and how do you want your charges split up?" What followed was simple enough. Her mother went first and half the group was in stripes in seconds. Then her father had a turn, and his ability was just as sure. Then it was congratulations all around and having her parent's friends 'find' their passports in their 'no pockets'. That brought a moment of seriousness to the crowd as they saw their certificates inside the green booklets.

"You give these out to everyone that makes the trip Home, don't you?" one of the group asked.

"Yes. That trip is a significant achievement," Ted said. "And being marked as a citizen of a different place is our way of letting you know just how significant. Up until Muriel made her first trip Home and back no living person had made the trip both ways. And even before, none had done so under their own power. The fact that more and more people are learning how to do it doesn't take away from the fact that it IS a significant achievement. Just as the skills you've learned are a major milestone in your lives. You each do things a little differently than others. That's fine, and what makes humans human. As you use them more you may find that you do them a lot different. Pass that information on, and back. If there's an easier way to do something, or a new application of a skill it might help others to know about it."

"Oh," one of the crowd said. "Something like Open Source Software. Spread the information and changes so everyone benefits. I wondered why you just gave away the training for free."

"Exactly like that," Muriel responded. "And originally it was just a case of if it's free more people will be able to afford it. Later we realized that it's like a drug. Once you've done it and used it you find more applications for its use, and some of them may be or appear to be dangerous. So actually, you're paying it forward. Even if you never get in those situations or

train others, you'll find it makes a difference in you, in your outlook. Some of you may already have noticed that," she said with a chuckle. "So, it's free so everyone can enjoy it. "

"Now, Ted and I have to leave you for a bit," Muriel said to her mother and father. "We've got someone else that's going to make the trip home in a few minutes. Ted gets to do the work, and I get to loaf along like the dutiful child."

"You go ahead, honey," her father said. "We understand that you have a long day of goofing off and trying the patience of Ted." That brought chuckles from the crowd and a mock scowl from Ted. "We should have another group ready for you in a few minutes."

Ted and Muriel turned toward Bret, and Ted showed him the difference between translating on earth and translating to another dimension. Then all three of them disappeared. Lotta, Melanie's father and Caleb met them as they appeared in Home. And another figure was somewhat distant and waiting. Bret immediately went to her. The discussion took a little time, but when Bret finally came back he had a broad smile on his face.

"I finally feel like I'm something of worth to my Martha," he said. "And I know I'll be back again. To see her, if she stays. Or to meet others. But now, I think I've had enough for the day."

When they re-appeared in front of Muriel's office the crowd had doubled, but had moved back to give them room. And the crowd cheered Bret and came over and shook his hand. Muriel's parents' friends were giving him a royal welcome. The first group had stayed to welcome him back, and had told the second group what was happening. As it turned out, a couple of the people in the second group knew Bret, though they weren't part of Bret's extraterrestrial group.

Ted asked Bret what he wanted for the fifth stripe, the braid. "Sunstone," Bret said. "It was kind of a joke between Martha and I. She liked moonstone." Ted looked at Muriel for a moment in a private sending. Then looked back at Bret.

"OK, sunstone it is," Ted said, smiling. He indicated to Bret to put his arms up, and his last two stripes appeared. But the braid was different. The sunstone was there, but paired with moonstone. Bret burst into tears, and was immediately mobbed by Muriel's parents' friends comforting him and admiring the braid.

"This . . . this is too much. What you've done. It's . . . it's fantastic. Thank you. I've got to go back. I've got to show her."

"Any time," Muriel said. "You know the way, now. But first, check your 'no pocket'," she added. And Bret pulled out his own passport and it's certificate. "And you might want to calm down a bit before you make the trip. You've got time. Come on in my office and get something to drink. Besides, my crew would like to see your new stripes, too."

Muriel turned Bret over to Mata to introduce around to her squads and friends, then

went back to her parents. "This is like trying to juggle chickens," she said. "ANYONE can juggle eggs. But juggling chickens is harder, 'cause they flutter about." And then it was time for the next group to get their stripes and passports. Shortly after, Terry showed up to say goodbye. He and his troops would be going back to their post. But he assured Muriel that he'd be back from time to time, and that his troops surely would to get their college courses for their degrees. Then it was back to supervising her parents in distributing stripes. All of the groups passed through by noontime, except for a few that were working during that time, and would be done later in the evening.

It was a very excited group of tourist-guests that wandered about Enclave and sampled restaurants and admired fashions. They had broken up into small groups, so they weren't mobbing any one particular place. And they couldn't get over the fact that they were treated like visiting royalty by all the Envoys, there. Some of them found the art gallery and volunteered to go through it and give their impressions for a record. The gallery manager had discovered that different people saw artwork in different ways, and this was becoming an art form of its own, especially among the Envoys. It was a glimpse into the minds of humans and showed them not only how art affected different ones, but some of the underlying reasons the people liked different art.

The manager of Guest House had similar feelings about people, though he didn't take recordings. For him, and what he passed along to other Envoys, was the behavior of people. Individual trainees had been somewhat subdued and awestruck. Terry Marshal's troops had been respectful but a bit rowdy. Muriel's parents' friends had been more settled even though excited, and pleased. All these differences and the reasons for them were being gathered up by the Envoys, and they began to see subtle differences in themselves which explained the reasons why they chose particular jobs.

It wasn't particularly surprising, then that the manager would want to meet Muriel's friends and talk with Mata and the squads. And Muriel was happy to have him come visit. She even told Mata to use the casual area to talk with him. Their discussion was all mental, and from the gleam in the manager's eyes, it was obvious that he was getting just the information he wanted and needed in order to understand humans even better. The meeting lasted about ten minutes, and the manager left.

Mata turned to Muriel and said, "Whoosh! Well, now I now what he's into. He's trying to tie behavior to events in peoples lives. Not to pry or anything like that. But to see if their current behavior is dependent on how they were raised, events that happened in their lives, genetics or heredity, or simply imbalances in the brain. And yes, he's working with Mark on this, too. He wanted to know my opinion of the kids behavior before and after their training. Not personal information. Just 'kid 1 was like . . . and now is like . . . ' sort of stuff. I did include you, or tried to. He said he already had the information on you, and that it looks like events win out over everything. He also asked about changes in Envoys, and yes, he's already looked into himself since beginning to interact with humans. Again, nothing specific to individuals."

"What he's trying to do," she continued, "is find out how better to deal with people. Not to try to influence them, but how to serve them. And yes, I believe him. He's always tried to

be helpful, and I don't mean just since Ted. And for us, always is a LONG time. Oh, and when I say he's working with Mark on this, Mark told him how to be sure that personal information or anything private was kept out. And Mark is interested in the information because he wants to branch into psychology and psychiatry as well as medicine. I think he'll make it, if he can get enough input."

"WOW! I can see why it took so long, if you had to dump all that on him. I've seen Envoys communicate, and usually it's over in seconds. I sometimes feel sorry for you, having to slow down for us poor dumb humans." Muriel said.

"Believe me, you make up for it in other ways," Mata replied, dryly.

"Um, Muriel? Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Bret! Sure, Sit down." Mata quietly made herself absent as Muriel went on, "What can I do for you?"

"I . . . well, I went back to Home and saw Martha. She took one look at my sleeves and hugged me. She . . . well, she hadn't done that for years before she died. And she saw the moonstone braided with the sunstone, and hugged me again. I . . . what happened?" he asked.

"Simple. You stopped guessing and went and found out. So she congratulated you for it. And then she noticed that you cared enough about her to remember her favorite stone, and thanked you for that."

"Well," Bret said, "in any case, I need to get back. I need to shut down our organization.."

"Oh, don't do that," Muriel said. "Just refocus it. You did that yourself when you took the training. So, show them. Tell them what you found out, and show them that it works. You know the basics, now. And we'd be glad to help you train them if they can pass the first test. Admit that you were wrong, yes. But offer them something better."

"You really think that will work?" asked Bret.

"Of course. I've seen it happen. And with greater frequency now than even a week or two ago. Go on. Try it, and come back and let me know how things work out. If you have troubles with them, maybe it's something I can help sort out. But in the mean time, you're always welcome here, and welcome to come back at any time. Take the opportunity to look around here and see what Enclave is. Talk to the Envoys. I think you'll find they're friendly. Give yourself a chance for the training to settle in and be comfortable."

"I appreciate that, Muriel. I really do. But I think I'd better get back, anyway. Otherwise they might worry and do something foolish. I know how to do it, how to translate home I mean. And I can call them from there and get the meeting early. I promise, if I run into trouble with them I'll call you for help."

"OK, Bret. If that's what you want to do. Don't forget to cash in your ticket, since you don't need it now."

"Thanks," Bret said as he got up, took two steps toward the door and disappeared.

Mata came back in. "Do you think he'll do as you asked?" she asked.

"I hope so. If he shows them what he can do and tells them about his experiences and they believe him, we may just have opened up another path to getting the training out. Many of the conspiracy organizations seem to have loose links to each other," Muriel said. "So, what's next?"

"Just the rest of your parent's group. The ones that were working. They won't show up until after supper, though. So you might as well go and relax for a while," Mata said.

"What about you? When do you rest?"

"Oh, Envoys aren't like humans. You know that. I take breaks now and then, and that's enough. Mostly what I do is organize and pass instructions to the duty squad. Oh, and chase after you, of course."

"Oh, of course," Muriel said, dryly. "As if I can 't take care of myself."

"Well, that's only to be expected," Mata added. "After all, you ARE just a little girl."

"Yes, mommy. And you're a real mother."

"Um, I think I've been insulted," Mata said.

"Why, Mata! How COULD you think that? I could never insult you."

"Now I KNOW I've been insulted. Now, let's see . . . who's the worst cook in the squads, I'll see that he makes your supper. And makes sure you eat every bite. All the foods you don't like, of course."

"And how is that different than what I've been getting for the last week? I think you've been keeping Chuck all to yourself. Greedy."

"Inconsiderate child, disrespectful of your elders."

"Old granny that's out of sorts because she can't find her false teeth."

"Monster."

"Oh, sure. Just like a man. When you lose an argument, start calling names."

"Ouch. That one hurt. I've been a girl, now, for long enough that I'd almost forgotten that I had been a man," Mata said laughing.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have pulled that one on you," Muriel said.

"No, no. It wasn't that. I knew that you were simply equating my behavior to that of a man. It's just that I also got, from myself, that I had once represented a man, so it was a double hit. Honest, I'm not sensitive about that."

"You're sure?"

"Honey, I've been around you long enough to realize that you really try not to upset people with your teasing. No, it was my own flashback that caused the ouch, not your statement. I really don't want to forget being a guy. And I want to learn more about what human males are like and compare it to what I learn about females from you. THAT'S what I was reacting to. That I'd been forgetting being male."

"Oh. OH! I get it. OK, is there any way I can help you with that comparison? Do you need to spend time as a guy? You could do that. I'd even put up with you being an adult, if that's what you needed," Muriel said.

"No, that would simply confuse others in here. Maybe not the Envoys, since what they recognize is a bit different than what a human recognizes, simply because mostly we recognize by mental touch."

"OK, how about tapping either some human males, either directly or indirectly through their Envoys?"

"Now, that's an idea. I'll look into it. Especially those going through the male version of what you've been going through. Somehow, this is significant, and I'd like to know how. I think this has to do with some of the behavior we've seen in adults that isn't there in children."

Chapter 15

New Directions

(Tuesday evening, Wednesday)

Muriel went to dinner with her parents at one of the fancier restaurants and, for a change, wore something other than her uniform. The dress she selected, while not formal, managed to convey an air of elegance even on someone of her diminutive and immature figure and form. Her parents were delighted with her choice of dress and restaurant, and also dressed for the occasion.

The manager was visibly nervous and standing by the door when they showed up for their reservation. Neither of the Ambassadors had graced his establishment before, and he wasn't quite sure how they'd take to it. He also visibly relaxed when he saw Muriel's parents. Then he knew. They'd been in several times and appeared to have enjoyed both the food and the atmosphere.

Having been briefed by other Envoy managers, he made sure that he addressed Muriel only by her name, and not her title, which seemed to please her. And he welcomed back her parents, warmly, and quickly directed them to a table where they were less likely to be jostled or disturbed by the other patrons.

After dinner, as the three were leaving, Muriel made a point of complimenting him on the establishment and the food, and assured him that she'd be back again, sometime. As they left, he heard Muriel say, "Mom, you were right. That is a great restaurant. Thanks for recommending it."

Shortly after, her parents' last group showed up. Muriel was still in her dress when they arrived in front of her office door with her parents. A couple of the people asked her parents where their daughter was. So Muriel gave an ironic smile, created a bell sound to alert them, and changed back into her uniform.

"Oops," one of them said. "Looks like I'll be getting coal for my braid," which caused laughter from the rest of the group and from Muriel.

"Naw, I wouldn't do that," she said. "I'll admit that I thought about it, but only as a joke. I wouldn't do it for real." Mata appeared and sent to Muriel that they all checked out, including balance. So, Muriel motioned for them to raise their arms and the stripes were applied. Unlike her boisterous friends, there was simply a collective sigh, then they turned and congratulated each other.

She stayed for a few minutes to meet each of them and get a feel of what their interests were and what jobs they were did. Most were middle class people who worked for

others, such as waiters/waitresses, hair dressers, engineers and architects. One was a minister, and Muriel waited for the inevitable explosion. It never came. However, he did ask to talk with her for a bit.

When they'd moved away from the group, he said, "I could almost feel you waiting for me to come down on you from some religious standpoint. I won't. Even before I went to Home I wasn't that type of person. Being there simply cemented that attitude. But I still have to help my congregation to understand what choice and judgment mean. What constitutes ethical behavior. How to treat each other and those that aren't of the congregation. And I've always stumbled over what do I tell them without seeming to tell them how to live?"

Mata moved up beside Muriel and said, "I'm not sure. But, if you wouldn't mind a guest preacher sometime, I think I can find someone that could give them an idea of how to create their own balance."

"Oh, this is Mata, my security chief," Muriel said. "She's an Envoy. And I think she's suggesting that she might know an Envoy that could help you."

"Really? And she'd speak to the congregation?" he asked.

"She or he. Yes," said Mata, "if you like. Actually, the person I was thinking of looks male, and has a long history of helping people who have experienced distressful situations and needed to learn how to balance themselves. I'll have to contact him, of course, but he's often wondered if there were a better way to prepare people than to simply dump them in judgment square. I'm sure he'd talk to you before he spoke to your congregation, too, just to be sure that you're both trying to look at the same problem for a solution."

"If I could get your contact information, reverend," Muriel said, "either Mata or I can get in contact with you about coming out to see you when we have an answer."

"Oh, just Floyd, please. I understand you don't parade fancy titles around, either. Meeting you, I think I understand why. They tend to get in the way of people actually communicating. A couple of minutes talking with you, and your uniform is forgotten. You're that warm and friendly." Floyd handed her a card with his name and phone number on it.

Muriel smiled, "Thanks. That's kinda the way I want it to be. I'd do without it and go back to blouse and jeans, but then no one would believe I'm the person they want to talk to."

"I know. I was the one that made the goof," he said with some humor. "And you were nice enough to toss it off."

"I don't mind minor goofs. And we do a lot of teasing and goofing around here, ourselves. What I mind are bullies and overly pompous people, like a certain Senator, that I won't name, that was in here the other day," Muriel said. "We'll get back to you, one way or another, just as soon as we find out. OK?"

"Very OK, and thanks." Floyd went back and joined the group, which was just getting

ready to disperse.

“You really think Caleb would talk to them?” Muriel asked Mata.

“I could almost guarantee it. He might even turn over the leadership of the guides to someone else and join us down here. He sees people that are so totally unprepared for their own death that sometimes it makes him cry. And Envoys aren't emotional. But that really gets to him. And many of them are supposedly religious, too.”

“You want me to go talk to him?”

“Nope,” said Mata. “I'll do that tonight, after I tuck you in. He and I have a history. Not always a good one, I'm afraid. But the last time he was down here, with you, he seemed cordial enough. Even friendly toward me. I think he got over the fact that I turned him down about joining his guides. No, I'll talk to him. I'd kinda like to re-establish that friendship.”

“Talk to Ted, too. If Caleb wants to come down here and start stumping congregations or whatever, we should probably set up an office for him and give him some sort of official recognition.”

“I'll do that. Now, young lady, it's getting late.”

“Yes, 'mother',” Muriel said, and giggled. “I'll go quietly. You don't need to shoot me again.”

The next day a delegation of military brass showed up, unannounced other than by Reception, ready to brow-beat her into submission concerning the role of the military in international affairs. Muriel didn't even let them in the office. Mata wasn't there, and Muriel was a little worried. Reception set them down in the street, in a square defined by three of Muriel's squads and with her friends on the fourth side, behind her.

“Don't!” she said, as they appeared. “Don't even start. You've seen what I can do. Imagine what it would be like to face an army of people with the sort of training that I have. You'd be fighting a war that you cannot win. I've heard the old saw that 'the best defense is a good offense'. I've got news for you. The best offense is an unbeatable defense. I've shown that that can be done. If you haven't wrapped your minds around it and understand it, then you're in no fit shape to talk to me.”

“But, can't you understand that the only thing holding the other nations off is our armed might?” one asked.

“Nope. I don't see that at all. What I do see is a horrendous waste of money and materials caused by an incompetent bureaucracy that the military has become. You're buying things at inflated prices that the average citizen can get much cheaper, from the same manufacturer. You're buying 'the next new thing' without realizing that it isn't new, it's just got a new model number on something old. You're bleeding the country twice, once with people and once with cash. And it's got to stop,” Muriel said. “Now, if that's all you have to say to

me, then we're done. Come back when you realize that you're fighting with old-fashioned rules against an adversary that doesn't believe in your rules. Come back when you're ready to learn a defense that's an offense. But not until then." She turned and walked through her friends and back into her office. Mata still hadn't arrived, and Muriel was about to ask one of her security Envoys if there was a way to track her when she appeared.

"Sorry," Mata said, "it took longer than I thought it would. Caleb . . . I thought all this time that he was mad at me, and avoided him. He never was. He knew why I didn't want to join his guides, and respected it, and waited for me to come back as a friend. That man has a LOT of patience. So, after I made my request, we did a lot of catching up, and I lost track of time."

"No problem. I'll admit I was a bit worried about you. But you're here, and that's what counts. And if you're friends with Caleb again, so much the better."

"Yea. Well, Caleb went for it," Mata said. "Not just the talking to the minister, either. I talked to Ted first, and told him what you said. He agreed that if Caleb wanted to come we'd build him an office to suit him, get at least one squad to act as security detail, and make arrangements to give him Ambassadorial status. He was impressed. But he said that maybe we should take it slow, and see what happens with Floyd, first. He'll be down a little later. He wants to set up with someone to take over leading the guides, first."

::Muriel, go to your office. We've got a guy in a blue military uniform approaching,::
Mata sent.

::OK,:: Muriel sent back, suiting action to words. ::Probably one of the crowd that thought they were going to browbeat me, earlier. I sent them packing,::

::Ah, well that tells me how to handle him, then. If he's honest, he'll get in. Otherwise, he'll find himself back at reception,::

"May I help you?" Mata asked the officer that was just inside the door, looking around.

"I . . . geez! There's a lot of kids in here. Oh, sorry. Yes, I'm General Stuart and I'd like to talk to the young lady that just spoke to that group, outside, if I could. She made a comment about the best offense being an unbeatable defense, and I'd like to learn more about it if I could."

"Well, General, I think I can help you some, without disturbing the Ambassador. Have a seat. I'd like to show you a video taken by an on-site reporter and camera man of an event that happened a few weeks ago." Mata set up the computer and turned the screen toward the General.

He watched for a few minutes, then jumped as the scene showed the principal shooting at Muriel. Very intently watched the slow motion replay of the shooting, then turned to Mata and said, "That's the same girl that came out and told off the other top brass, isn't it?"

“Yes, that's Muriel. Before she was completely trained, by the way. She intentionally made a target of herself to make fools of the bullies in her school, and with only one day of training. Now, watch this one. Unfortunately, this wasn't done by a reporter, so you're going to get a split-screen record of the event from two points of view. There is sound, but you won't hear any conversation. Here, let me start it from where we made the last pickup. The section on the left is from the point of view of Muriel. On the right is the record from one of her security squads that was flying stealth – I think that's what you would call it – above the bus we were using to pick up her friends.”

The scene showed someone boarding the bus, and the bus pulling away. An RPG entered the scene after about a quarter of a mile and stopped one foot from the bus. Suddenly, sirens broke out and the bus and lead and chase cars took off at high speed.

“If the city found out that we tripped all the traffic lights to red in all directions for that run, we'd probably be in a lot of trouble,” Mata said with a grin. The record played out to the point where the bus pulled up in front of Muriel's office and the kids disembarked through a tunnel of Envoys.

“The rest of it is rather uninteresting unless you can hear the mental chatter between individuals. Basically, Bart, Ted's security chief, came and took over, and they got the grenade to a safe location and found out how to keep it from going off. It took Muriel all of five minutes to calm down enough to go on with demonstrating some things to her friends.”

“Oh,” Mata went on, “and the kids you see in here? Half of them are real children – Muriel's friends from school. They've all had our training. The other half, like me, are actually Envoys that have decided to look like kids, to make it a bit more comfortable for Muriel. Actually, I don't think she even really notices the difference any more.”

“And the young lady? Are you saying that that's the Ambassador?” the General asked.

“Oh, she's definitely that. And co-leader of Home and the Envoys. And yes, she's only twelve. Well, anyway, that's what an unbeatable defense is like. And that's just the first level of the training,” Mata said. “There are, of course, other techniques that go into the training, including a trip to Home, where we Envoys come from. And that's the basics. What people do with the training afterward can sometimes be a bit unusual. Different combinations or applications of our training can result in some spectacular results.”

“I know,” Stuart said. “I saw the footage on the accident that happened out here, and how you people cleared it up. The movement of the cars and trucks was unreal. Like a ballet. In fact, when the other 'gentlemen' said they wanted to come and talk with her, that's the reason I joined them. I had no idea that they were going to try to call her out for making the military look small. So, when she sent us all back, I stuck around. Unlike them, I can see the handwriting on the walls, and it doesn't even have to be giant economy sized for me to read it. She's shown that there's something that can stop conventional warfare. I saw that demonstration held by the arms manufacturers, too. I definitely want to talk to her. If she'll talk to me, after the way those guys treated her.”

"Oh, I'll talk. More importantly, I'll listen," Muriel said from behind him. "And what I have to say will depend on what you say. Come on into my office, General."

"Wait . . . what? . . . you were in your office. Then you were behind me. How"

"Oh, part of the training," Muriel said, casually retaking her seat behind her desk. She motioned to a chair on the other side and went on, "I can go from point A to point B without bothering with all the fiddly bits in between. At the time of the school incident I wasn't completely trained. That was later that day. And you should have seen my friends when they learned. Twelve kids learning how to translate, and flipping from the break-room to points all over Enclave. It was like being inside a popcorn machine," she said, smiling at the memory.

"Well, this isn't getting to why you wanted to talk to me," Muriel added.

"What I'd like to know is how to save my job. And I think what you do may be part of it. Unlike those goniffs that confronted you, I don't see my job as throwing as much destructive force as possible until an enemy caves. I'd like to think that what I do is meant to protect rather than be aggressive. Your idea of an unbeatable defense being the best assault seems to fit right in with that. Just for that, alone, I'd love to take the training. But I also have to think of the role of the Air Force and how it can continue to be protectors. I'll take the training, if you let me. But my real mission is to save the Air Force, if possible."

"Well. You won't be the first military to be trained, though you'll be the highest ranking, I think. That's if you can pass the first test. As for how you can use it to save the Air Force, well, that's going to be up to you. We don't have any hard and fast answers for that. Mainly because what the training is all about is protection, not aggression. You made points by saying that that's how you see your job. Oh, and the fact that you're polite and are asking questions rather than making accusations certainly helps."

"So, let's see if you can be trained," Muriel said. "Relax. This won't hurt . . . much. Just look at me, see where I'm sitting, what I look like, then close your eyes and rebuild the image there. OK? Good. Now, in your mind, reach out to me and tap me on the shoulder."

::Miss Muriel?::

::OK, you can be trained. And it's just Muriel. I don't bother with titles::

"That's it?" Stuart asked.

"Yep. Everything else builds off of that. In fact, that's how we train is by using that link to monitor how a trainee follows instructions and correcting them as they go along. We don't believe in failure, here. Everyone that we've trained has passed. We just keep pounding on them until they get it," she said with a grin. "I suggest you not try linking again, though, until we can get you linked to some power. Otherwise you'll end up with a vicious headache. In fact, if you've got one now, tell me, and I'll make it go away."

"Nothing that won't go . . . OH! . . . Hey, what?"

“Oh, I just fed you a little power to build you back up. That and a small jolt to your blood sugar. Tends to make headaches disappear. OK,” Muriel said, changing the subject, “here's what we have to offer. Training can take from one to four days, depending on how fast you are. We actually pushed one through in only a half a day, but I think that was a fluke. We supply a place to stay, in our Guest House across from the Reception building, food, clothing if needed. Oh, and a 'battlefield first aid' course goes along with the completion of the training, as do stripes, like the ones you see on my epaulettes, for recognition of the completion of the basic training, and a passport as recognition of being a Citizen of Home. We also supply an Envoy to help with parts of the training, a suitcase for your current clothing – you'll understand why when you hit that part of your training – and an Envoy as a protector and monitor for those times when you need it. We also do groups, though we prefer to keep them relatively small, say about fifteen at a time.”

“In addition,” she added, “when you've completed the training you'll be able to train others. Under supervision at first, though it's friendly and not meant to be overbearing. Think of it as just another training exercise, but done on the job. So, any questions?”

“Cost?”

“Free. We don't charge for the training. And the rest goes with it, so it's also free. You'll understand what that all means when you start getting trained. If you still want to.”

“Still want to? You've GOT to be kidding. When can I start?” Stuart asked.

“When do you want to start. You'll need up to four days off from your regular job,” Muriel replied.

“Let me make a phone call, and I'll find out,” he answered.

Muriel handed him her phone. “It's charged against Enclave. Save you the cost of a long distance call.” Stuart goggled at her pulling it seemingly out of thin air, then tentatively took it and entered a number. A few minutes discussion and he canceled the call and handed it back.

“OK, I'm free for the next four days. Actually longer, I took a week. But that's because I want to be able to look around while I'm here. If you don't mind.”

“No reason for us to mind,” Muriel said. “We run an open Embassy and encourage visitors. We don't want people getting the wrong idea about us, thinking that we have secrets to hide, or something. So, now all I need is an adult male Envoy to help. Mata? Who do we have available?”

“Will I do?” said a male voice from the entrance to her office.

“Caleb! Come on in. Caleb, this is General Stuart of the Air Force. He's come for training.”

"Hmm. That name sounds familiar," Caleb said.

"Different spelling. Different person. And I really wish my parents hadn't named me James," Stuart said. "I'm ALWAYS getting that. But he's dead."

"Yes, I know. That's why the name was familiar. I was the one that met him at Home and helped him settle in," Caleb replied. "Now, Muriel, I know I've never worked with you, before, but I've been following what you do and how you do it, and I think I can manage to be a monitor. And I'm definitely an adult male and can help him make his uniform. I might ask for a visual on the suitcase, and maybe a couple of other things, if you don't mind linking to me. But we shouldn't have any trouble."

"Caleb, that's over and above why we asked you to come."

"I know. But I'm here, and I'm available, and the minister can wait a couple of hours. We need to set up a time to meet with him, anyway. Some time when he isn't involved with his ministerial duties. He's a very dedicated man. We'll work it out. No reason we can't do both things, just switch off from time to time. Most of the training, after all, you can do alone. It's only this first phase that you'd really need someone like me. So let's get him protected, then I can take him some place to get him dressed, and we'll see what goes from there," Caleb said.

It only took about fifteen minutes to get Stuart powered up and shielded. There was a moment of pause when Don appeared, swinging his bat, and Stuart blocked it with his hand – except that the bat was a foot away from it.

"Yep. Another successful shield, Muriel," Don said. "And WHOA, I like the reactions on this one. He couldn't have more than seen me out of the corner of his eye, and his hand was there to stop the bat. Nice going, General."

"I take it," Stuart's voice was shaky, but he managed to get it out, "that you're the official shield tester?"

"Yes, sir. And trainer, and all around bat-boy." The last drew a snort and a smile from the General. "Now, what happens if I don't give it back to you?"

"This," Don said, and promptly pulled it from his 'no pocket', causing it to disappear from Stuart's shield.

"Neat trick. You going to teach me how you do that?" Stuart asked.

"If you like. You'll learn about 'no pockets' when you learn to make your clothes. And if they don't teach you the application, just ask for me. I'm Don."

"And what are 'no pockets'?"

“Only about the neatest trick there is. They're a pocket where no pocket should be. Therefore, 'no pockets'.” This brought another snort from Stuart, and even the beginnings of a laugh. And his smile got broader.

“I'm beginning to see how things are around here. The one with the worst pun wins,” he said. “Well, I'm game. Just not baseball. And I'm pitching a 'no hitter'.”

Don laughed. “Yep. You'll fit right in. I didn't know that Generals were as crazy as people.”

“Well,” Stuart said, “some of us actually are people. And pilots are all crazy, anyway.”

Chapter 16

Flying High (Wednesday)

Muriel took Caleb, Stuart and Don to her apartment, then left, telling them to just come back to her casual area when they were done. While she was waiting she checked with the manager of the Guest House about a room for Stuart, and got a room number and visual for it. She also checked with Mata about an appointment with Floyd for Caleb. Mata had already set it up for after supper. It was only a short time later, maybe a half hour total, when two laughing men and a boy appeared in her casual area.

"Muriel," Caleb said, "I'm going to really enjoy working with you and your people. I haven't had this much fun in centuries. I'm beginning to think I needed a break away from my job. So, I'm taking it."

"Man, I've made some fast trips in my life, but NOTHING like that," Stuart said.

"Oh, yea. For your information, he's got his uniform, obviously. He's also got his room. We checked with the manager and he said he'd just set it up with you, gave us the number and visual, so we dropped off the suitcase there. Then came here. Oh, yea. Don said to tell you that Stuart did the translations himself, if that makes a difference."

"It does. Stuart, where do you want your stripes. Envoys and those that are trained will be able to see them any time. Those that aren't trained will only see them if you let them. And it's very specific. You can let one or two out of a crowd see them, or any number, or all of them."

"Muriel," Stuart said, "I just don't know. I understand I've got one more trip to take. Can we leave it 'til then?"

"Of course. Oh, and I alerted a friend in Home, so you should be met on that end. It makes it easier."

"Then let's get it on."

Muriel gave him the visuals and the twist needed to see the other dimension, checked to see that he had a good visual, then a good scan, and they translated. Caleb and Don joined them on the square.

As Stuart appeared on the square a voice rang out, "AIR FORCE! 'Ten HUT!", and fifty feet hit the pavement. "HAND SALUTE!" and fifty right hands just touched the bill of their visored 'flying saucer' hats. As Stuart returned the salute he noticed a familiar but unusually composed formation fly by above them. The Air Force was doing themselves up proud. But without planes.

Two people left the formation and came forward one in Air Force blues, and one in Marine Corps blues. "Congratulations, sir," said the Air Force officer. The Marine stopped and saluted again. "Beggging your pardon, sir, but I thought you might like some friendly faces when you got here. Almost had to stop a riot when they found out it was Air Force that was coming to visit."

"Sergeant," the General said, "You did yourself and the Air Force proud. Thank you. And, if I've got my facts right, I know who these men and you are. And I'm honored that they would put on such a show. Now," he went on, "there's a problem I have that you two might be able to help me with. I understand that, when I get back, I'm to get some stripes. And the question is, where to put them. Any ideas?"

"Sir," the Air Force officer said, "how about the epaulettes, but closer to the button. That way they won't conflict with your rank."

"Sergeant? What do you think?"

"Yea, that sounds good, sir. But, if I know Muriel, and I do, she'll tell you that you can move them around to suit the circumstances and clothing. You might get with my daughter on that, too. She was a Marine. Now she's President's Detail Chief. But I'm sure that she'd be happy to help you figure out the various uniforms you have and how to embellish them. Just ask for Melanie Carter."

"I'll do that, sergeant. And thank you. Thank you, too, Colonel," he said to the Air Force officer. "And now, I think I'd better go. If I can, I'll be back, and I'll look you and the men up."

"Muriel, you ready to go?" Stuart asked.

"Whenever you are," she replied. They appeared back in Muriel's casual area. Stuart immediately sought a seat, and buried his face in his hands for a bit. After a minute, he straightened up and stood back up.

"Sorry," he said. "That was a bit intense. Even with the welcoming committee. I knew some of those men in the ranks. Flew with some of them. Kind of brings it home just exactly what Home is. Now," he went on, "I think I'll take the Colonel's and Sergeant's advice, if you don't mind."

Muriel looked at Caleb and he nodded. "There is a fifth stripe," she said, "and it's braided like this." She pointed to the set of stripes on her epaulette. "It's been the tradition, so far, to make them out of a gem or shiny metal or mineral. Do you have something in mind?"

"Silver. Same as the stripes. It'd be more in keeping with the Air Force way. I could have said gold but, somehow, I feel silver would be more fitting."

"Then silver it is," she said, and the stripes appeared one inch from the button on the epaulettes. "And now you can relax. The training is done."

"Not quite," Mark said, walking into her office. "There's still the 'battlefield first aid'. Won't take a minute, General. And congratulations." He looked thoughtful for a moment, then said, "That's it. NOW you can relax. That dump I gave you will open up in the next couple of days. Try not to need it until then," he added with a smile. "Caleb. Nice to see you here. I haven't had a chance to get back up, lately. Someone I know keeps having people faint around her and it's kept me busy."

"Beast. Nobody's fainted in at least two days."

"I know," Mark replied. "And it's had me on pins and needles the whole time. I kept wondering if you were going to have a whole troop of people faint at once. Infant."

"AGE DISCRIMINATION!" Muriel shouted. "Unfair to underage females. I should sue."

"Go ahead. I won't contest it, and the judge can give you half of whatever I make."

"Yea, right. Half of nothing," she said. "So I still lose out." Caleb just chuckled.

"Well, half of nothing is better than none of . . . oh, wait. No it isn't. It's the same. Um . . . maybe we should go to supper. Got any place in mind?" asked Mark.

"Not right off hand. I really haven't had the chance to go to too many," Muriel replied.

"Ask Mata," Caleb said. "That's what she's here for."

"Mata? She knows about restaurants?"

"You'd be surprised at what she knows. Or can find out. She also knows you and what you like. So ask her. I bet that she'll have an idea of where to go that you'd like, and it will be different than any place you've been. You need to get around more. Oh, I know," Caleb said, "you haven't actually had much time to find out. I'm not talking about your past, I'm talking about your future. The people here love you and want to do for you. So give them a chance. Pick a new place, and not just once in a while. Meet as many of the people as you can."

"Well," Muriel said, "I do try to find new places. I guess I'll just have to try harder. Mata?"

It took all of five seconds for Mata to give her a name and a visual, and say that she'd set up a reservation for five – she included Don – for one half hour away. It was a good thing she did. Finding a place to translate in was impossible. Then ended up walking a block to reach it, and only Muriel's uniform got them through the crowd. Well, that and a security squad. The squad created a corridor, and the five reached the front door and were met by the manager. He escorted them personally to a table and had hot and cold running waiters and waitresses assisting in everything from water to bringing their dinners after they'd ordered.

Mata was right. And so was Caleb. Between dinner and desert the band took a break and the manager took the mic to tell the rest of the diners that Ambassador Muriel was there, and she had to stand up and wave to everyone. The cheering went on for five minutes. It was a jolt to Muriel. She had no idea that she was even known outside of her office, and even less idea that the Envoys were so proud of her, nor that the visitors even knew who she was.

“Caleb, you were right. Both about Mata and about the people. I didn't know.”

“Well, like you said, you've been busy. And now I have a meeting to go to. So I'll leave you for tonight and see you in the morning.”

For Muriel, Mark, Don and the General, the rest of the evening was uneventful, or at least relatively. For Caleb, it was anything but. He translated into a quiet part of the neighborhood, making sure that there was no traffic, foot or vehicular, to notice him appear. He then walked to the minister's house and rang the bell.

“Good evening, Reverend Miller. My name is Caleb. I'm an Envoy. Mata and Muriel felt that I might be of service to you.”

“Oh! Good evening, Caleb. I'm sorry, but I was about to go out. One of my congregation is dying. We knew it was coming. She's elderly, and not in the best of health, and has been in the hospital for the past week. Maybe we could do this again, later.”

“Or, maybe you could invite me to come with you. You see, I do know something about death. No, I won't stop it. It would only prolong things for your friend. But maybe I can make it easier for her for when she reaches Home. I know that side of it only too well. I was head of the guides that met the souls of those who died, and know the agony they go through. Agony that they needn't have with a little help from this side. May I join you? In fact, if you'll allow me, we can get there faster. I can take you.”

“How?”

“Envoys can go from one place to another without bothering with all that stuff in between. You know that. We also aren't at the mercy of vehicles that seem to have a mind of their own, or traffic conditions that would test the patience of an Envoy.”

Floyd thought for a moment. “Let me get my coat, and tell my wife I'll be gone for a bit.” Five minutes later he was back, tie still askew but with a suit coat on.

Caleb straightened the tie, then took his arm and translated. He'd spent the five minutes getting a fix on where the woman was, and keeping an eye on gaps in people moving in and out of her room. So, he just rang a small bell sound and translated Floyd to the woman's side.

“Helen,” Floyd said. “I'm here. I brought a friend who'd like to meet you.” The woman

in the bed seemed hardly aware.

Caleb stepped to her side and took her hand. "Hello, daughter," he said. "My name is Caleb."

The woman's eyes opened, and in a whispery voice said, "I hardly think I'm your daughter."

"True," he said. "At least in the physical sense. Especially since Envoys have no gender. We look like what we want or need to look like. One of my best friends is now a twelve year old girl, for instance. But in another sense you are very like a daughter to me. One to care for. One to guide. One to support when you stumble. One to encourage when you're down."

"Well," she said, "I'm certainly down now, and I won't be getting up again."

"True, in a sense. But soon you'll be in another place, with people around you that you know – friends, relatives, new friends that you don't know yet. And Envoys to help you over the rough spots."

"Are you here to send me on my way?" she asked.

"No. But I can go with you, if you like, and introduce you to others that will welcome you and help you, there."

"What's it like?"

"Ah, the question that everyone wants to know, and few do," Caleb said. "My own impressions you probably wouldn't understand. But I can tell you what it was like for a twelve year old girl. Vast. Always a soft warmth like summer but without the oppressive heat. Somewhat desert like, but that's slowly changing now."

"The people, when they first get there, are often in shock and have to be comforted, guided, supported until they stop beating themselves up over things that they never were in control of anyway," he went on. "Those that have been there a while are happy, many learning how to avoid some of the problems they had in life so that they can come back here to a new one."

"You're talking about reincarnation," she interrupted.

"Yes, you could call it that. You've been through this many times, but don't remember them right now. You will, after a while when you get there."

"How do you know so much about it?" she asked.

"I'm an Envoy. One of the ones from Home. Well, actually, all Envoys are from Home. And we all have jobs that we do, mostly because we see a need and fill it. Up until a few

hours ago I was the head of a bunch of Envoys that guided those that had just arrived. Comforted them. Helped them to understand that the judgment they faced was themselves judging themselves. Helping them regain their balance between what they could do and what they had no control over. Helping them face the self-doubts they had over decisions they'd made in life. Some go through a great deal of agony over those self-doubts. But you've no need to. Do you, Helen?"

"You would judge so?" she asked.

"Envoys don't judge. We can't. We're not human. We're soul that has never had a body, so we can't understand what you go through except on an intellectual level. We're protectors. And often what we have to protect is a human from his or her own self."

"No flaming sword?" she asked, almost whimsically.

"No flaming sword. And NO feathers. Just people that look human but are really much different. Though that's changing some as we learn more about what drives humans. You really are fortunate, you know. You go through much more experience and are so much more creative than any Envoy does and is. And one little girl and her friends are right up there at the top of teaching us. One girl that dared to go Home and back, alive and under her own power. When you come back maybe you'll have the chance to do that, too, and you'll understand why it's nothing to be afraid of."

"Home." Helen made the statement hang like a question in the air.

"Home. Everybody goes Home, sooner or later. The ones the Envoys weep for are the ones that die young. Way too young. Who've never had a chance to taste life like you have, and are confused and made afraid by what they've heard about what happens when they die. Those are the ones that we have to take the most time with. But even they come around to understanding that it wasn't their fault, whatever was bothering them. Then they can be happy and look forward to coming back here. You have nothing to fear, Helen. I'll go with you, if you like. But you don't need me. There will be others there, at least one old Marine that is human, that will greet you, welcome you, help you find yourself without judging you, help you settle in."

"Nothing to be afraid of"

"Nothing at all. You've been judging yourself all your life. You're one of the fortunate ones. You have very few delusions about who you are and what you've done. What decisions you've made in life. So you're balanced. Stable. From an Envoy's point of view, sane. So, one Marine sergeant that's taken it upon himself to do the job that I was doing. Meeting those as they arrive, seeing that friends and relatives are there to greet them, that Envoys are there to comfort them. That's what you'll see. And you'll know, in a way that can't be described, that you are the only judge you have. No rationalizations, there, and some of it may hurt. But they'll HELP you. No punishment but what you give yourself. And no forgiveness but what you allow yourself to accept. And peace."

Floyd watched as the old woman smiled at Caleb. Then her eyes closed, and she seemed to let go of something. Her breathing stopped, and he called the floor nurse to attend to what was left to do.

As he and Caleb left the room, Floyd said, "Her family never showed up. Well, her son, actually. The rest are all dead."

"That's a burden that her son will have to bear, unless we can get to him and talk him through it. However, Helen was met by that Marine, and her husband and father were both there, as well as one of the best Envoys I trained for the job. She's in good hands, and actually somewhat cheerful, already. It looks like it worked. Take the fear out of dieing and get people as balanced as possible and the transition can go smoothly."

"How do you know all this?" Floyd asked.

"Oh, I was in touch with the Envoy and the Marine. They were both at her side as soon as she arrived, and her husband and father were close behind them. So I got the record of the meeting. She's already looking younger, which is a good sign. Thank you, Reverend, for letting me come."

"Is there any way that I can learn to do what you do?" Floyd asked.

"Maybe. Let me get you back home, first. Then I'll go talk to Muriel – no, on second thought I'll talk to Mata, that friend I told you about. Muriel will likely be getting ready for bed, soon, and she doesn't need an all-night discussion with an old Envoy. I can talk to her tomorrow. But Mata is an Envoy, and doesn't need sleep. And she's deep enough into Muriel that she may have some insights as to how we can do this. I'll get back to you. Or they will. Either way, we'll do the best we can to see if this can be passed on. Then we'll bring you into the discussion to see how we can apply it to you, if it can be done."

By then, they had translated back to Floyd's front door. Caleb left him there and translated back to Enclave and Mata.

Chapter 17

And A New Day Begins (Thursday morning)

Caleb and Mata had spent the night going over the record of his meeting with Helen, and trying to figure out if it was something that humans could do. Mata related what she had discovered about Muriel and her mothering of her friends, and how the friends had all turned out balanced within acceptable levels. Mark, who had little to do most evenings and nights, was brought in to talk about what he'd learned about humans from the psychological point of view. All of them felt that they were missing something, though they discussed it from every angle they could think of.

Muriel found them gathered around Mata's desk, and suggested that they take the discussion to her casual area, and Ted came in to join them. Muriel ordered coffee for everyone, managing to sneak the fact that she'd ordered for herself, too, past the somewhat distracted adults. She took her 'appointed' seat in the recliner, and set her cup on the stand that had recently been placed by it.

"So, what have you found out?" she said.

"That my darling charge is a sneak, and is going to stunt her growth," Mata said with a smile. "I suppose it was bound to happen, Ted. Our little one is growing up and starting to assert herself. No more getting anything past her."

"I hate to tell you, Mata, but we never DID get anything past her. I've even been wearing lead-lined underwear just to try to keep her from seeing too much when she saw right through us."

"Who told you that lead would work?" Muriel asked sweetly, and Ted blushed. Mata just snickered.

"I'd have thought that you'd know better than to leave a leading comment like that laying in front of her," Mata said.

"Besides," Mark added, "how do you know that she doesn't already know what boys look like." And Muriel blushed.

"It wasn't like that! Bobby got hurt, and I patched him up. Mom and dad were both there helping me!" she exclaimed. Then stopped and thought for a minute. "Bobby. We need Bobby. He's been reading pain. Remember what he did with some of Melanie's crew? He explained it then, that he'd been reading mental pain and trying to do something about it since shortly after we friends had formed up."

"So, what do you want to know?" Bobby said, as he walked in and sat down. "Oh!

Coffee.”

“You're too young, sprout,” Ted said.

“If I'm old enough for an adult conversation, then I'm old enough for an adult drink,” Bobby said, getting a cup for himself without bothering to get up and fetch it. “Now, as I was saying It's like an emotion. I could feel them long before I learned to make a mental link. Deeper level than thought. And I feel it as being a pain. Not to me, but to the person experiencing it. If it had been my pain it would probably have driven me crazy. As it was, it only drove me half crazy. And, over time, I learned that I couldn't cure all pains. How did you mother us, Muriel?”

“Hmm. Interesting question. I just saw the way a situation was going, and tried to redirect it into non-hostile ways, I think. Mata, you're deep enough into me. Can you see what I'm trying to say?”

“Well . . . it looks like it's an analysis thing. Like you were projecting from what was going on and could see paths to take to avoid a bad outcome. Yours wasn't a mental link, either, and it made use of emotions in that you were reading them to some extent and trying to find ways to defuse them. Or at least deal with them. Almost like you were drawn to a particular path as being the way through.”

“The way through,” Muriel said. “That's what dad used to say all the time. Especially when I'd gotten into trouble. 'The only way out is through'. So, point of view may have something to do with it. I was always looking for a way through. Bobby was looking to stop the pain he could see or feel. And Ted”

“Ted was trying to end the injustice,” he said. “Too many people trying to grab for too much power, and abusing people in the process. Too many unspoken rules to follow. Too much emphasis on appearance and expectations that were never defined properly. And too little education.”

“And I just wanted to counter the fear and terror I could feel from the new arrivals, at first,” Caleb said. “It sounds like we were all operating on some version of emotion. That would imply that if we could somehow manipulate the emotions of people, we could end a great deal of greed for money or power, a lot of emotional pain and a lot of injustice. It also means that we would be guilty of messing with people's minds on a scale far beyond that of the most active advertising agency or religion or political party. Why should we use their methods?”

“Caleb,” Ted said, “don't look at me to say that it's for their own good. That's the trap that many of the worst injustices in the world have resulted in. But how can we counter the emotional attacks of others?”

“With truth,” Muriel said. “Show people the truth. Part of that is being done by the training. In the end we all go Home, and it isn't a place to fear. Expose the illegal acts that allow individuals to have power over others, or to amass fortunes beyond what the average

person is able to gain”

“But those acts aren't, under the current mass of legislation, illegal,” Ted said, cutting her off.

“True, but how long do you think those laws would last if the public realized how one sided they are? It's a form of bullying, buying laws that allow the few to rule and enslave the everyday people, and for their own personal gain. And they compound the activity by humiliating those same individuals by saying that they are inferior in one way or another, to the point where those everyday people begin to think that they really are inferior,” Muriel went on.

“Take what I did to the arms manufacturers,” she added. “In a sense, that was public humiliation of them. But it wasn't I that humiliated them. I showed them a truth. Their own actions were what humiliated them. It's a narrow line, and what the balance demands. The same with Mr. Secretary of State Scot when he tried to humiliate us – me – when he first came to Enclave. Or Havershaw when he tried to humiliate me. Even those bullies at school used humiliation for their own pleasure – the acts they performed at the expense of their victims. And they were humiliated by not being able to humiliate me, and that caused their anger and actions.”

“Interesting point,” Caleb said. “So, you're saying that you are the judge?”

“NO!” Muriel said. “No, I'm not the one judging them. They are judging themselves by their own actions. Their behavior condemns them, and they lash out in their shame – their sudden feeling of insignificance in the face of a truth. And please don't capitalize it like it was some holy ornament by saying 'what is Truth?' That kind of garbage is what religions feed on to foster guilt in their followers.”

“Public exposure used to be done in the stocks and such,” she added. “Now, it's done on television and the Internet, showing the general population – the everyday people – just what's going on. Every person we train becomes another element of the truth of the balance, the truth of self-judgment. And they train others. And those others gain the balance, if they don't already have it, and so it goes. More truth. More evidence that can't be refuted because it can be seen. And every time that one of the bullies, the greedy, the liars try to strike back they allow us to defend ourselves and reinforce that truth and humiliate themselves.”

“No, in the long run they will eliminate themselves by simply not having enough like minded people to choose as mates. Therefore a constant reduction in those like them. And in the mean time we increase the number with training, and find a way to give hope to those who don't have the training. And I think that last is what Caleb is trying to do. Give them hope. Reduce their fear. And help them to understand themselves. I think if Floyd tries to do it he will lose his position as a minister. It's possible that just having Caleb speak to his congregation will cause that, too,” she concluded.

“And you've just seen what Muriel does, but at a vocal speed. She analyzes and finds

the most likely path to succeed. It probably took her longer to say it than it did to actually find the path,” Mata said. “And it’s all at an emotional level, coupled to her rational abilities. Unreal. I’ve never seen anything like it. No wonder she chooses the paths she does.”

Caleb then seemed to come out of a reverie. “Muriel, is there a way I can speak to the congregation without getting Floyd in trouble?”

“Maybe. We need to run it by Floyd, too. But right off hand eliminate anything about religion or the religious symbols associated with the past of Home. You can speak of seeing those that have gone before them, of facing judgment – but nothing about who does the judging, there. You can talk about judging themselves here, so that they’re ready. You can even speak about the help they’ll receive from the Envoys of Home. That may be a bit touchier, since the religions don’t recognize or realize what Home was before Ted hit it. You can talk about caring about others, protecting others, especially children. You might even speak about wars of acquisition and how they are so unnecessary. And religious wars are anathema. I think that about covers it,” Muriel concluded.

“Bobby,” Caleb said, “Is there any way that I can learn your trick of feeling that others have pain? Is there a way to pass it on?”

“I don’t know. I never thought of it from that side. I probably should have. My guard and mentor might, though. He and I have talked a lot. Mentally, that is. And he’s pretty deep into me, because sometimes it’s a bit overwhelming for me and I need someone that understands.”

Bobby’s Envoy appeared by him, a bag of popcorn in one hand, and said, “I’ve been following this conversation. Well, actually, I think every Envoy in Enclave that isn’t currently busy is following it. You’ve been hitting some very deep subjects. As for Bobby’s trick, yes I think it can be taught. It’s partly empathic and partly body language. But it would have to be restricted to those that are definitely balanced and strong. Bobby’s actually borderline on the strength, which is why he comes to me. I’ll have to think about how to package it for training, and maybe even run it by the trainers to see what they think before I could say definitely, though.”

“Well, that’s closer than we were,” Ted said. “Now we come down to the real question, Caleb. Are you staying?”

“Yes and no. I need to check in with the one that’s replacing me as leader of the guides for a while, to see if he has any questions or problems that he hasn’t faced before. But the check ins are actually brief, so I don’t see them stopping or even slowing down my new job. So, yes, I’m staying. I’d like to have a corner of someplace where I can do some work, but I’d also like to be somewhere close to you and Muriel. Would that be possible?”

“Yep. Next door. The other side from Muriel’s. As soon as we know what you want, we’ll have it built,” Ted replied.

“But, I thought there was a building over there!” Caleb said.

"A lot of buildings in Enclave aren't occupied yet," Ted said. "What's there can be torn down and replaced with whatever suits you. Right now, we have a main area of Enclave that most visitors see, an auxiliary area where some visitors go, a maintenance section that does the actual construction in most cases – our offices were done by our security details, which gives you an idea of how busy THEY are – and this section, which I'd intentionally left blank for whoever we could train to become an Ambassador. Well, I joined her, in a sense, building a mirror image floor plan on the other side of that wall. Might as well keep all administration in the same area, unless you object."

"No," said Caleb, "I don't object. It keeps me close to you and Muriel and her friends."

"Good. Oh, and we'll supply you with a security detail and administrative staff, plus all of the conveniences you see in Muriel's office and any others you might think of. Bart's already canvassing the possible volunteers to see who might be interested in working with you in either function. We're only giving you one squad, to begin with. If you need more, we'll have them for you. And administrative is because you won't be able to swap off the way Muriel's and my squads do. We believe in down time for the squads. It gives them a chance to detox from whatever is going on, as well as sometimes amazing ideas come out of them when they aren't thinking about them."

"Is that why there's a large break-room in here?" Caleb asked.

"Yep," said Muriel. "I wanted there to be a place for all four of my squads to be here if they had to. And to be used as a gathering place if they just wanted to hang out. As it works out, I've usually got all four in here as well as my friends. And their Envoys. Fred and his squad supposedly only work during the day. But I've seen them hard at it at night, too. Something will occur to him, and the next thing I know he and his squad are back at it. Then break off after a while and go back to their down time."

"Well, I need to get back to Home for a few minutes," Caleb said. "I'd like to check on that friend of Floyd's that died last night. See how the transition went for her, after I'd spoken to her. A miniature version of Muriel's office wouldn't be out of line, perhaps with a bit larger casual area, though. Something tells me that I might have a few more people in at a time than would fit in this. A conference table would be more in line, something like what Muriel has in her apartment. Maybe, instead of an apartment I could have conference area upstairs. Or even next to the office, for that matter, since I really don't need an apartment. Really, whatever you think is best." He stood up and disappeared.

"Alright. I've got Bart working on it," Ted said, "and I think Mata is supervising him," he added with a smile. "Caleb's squad and administrative group are finally finalized, and they'll be working with a couple of my squads to put it together. I'm half tempted to have a door put between your two offices, but we'll see what Bart comes up with, first. But right now I think that we should take the discussion out of here. Bobby and his Envoy are obviously deep in conversation. They don't need us disturbing them. They may be coming up with something."

As they went out to Mata's desk, General Stuart came in. "Muriel," he said, "can I

show you something? I know you did it, once, but I don't think you know how you did it."

"Oh! A mystery. OK." They went back outside, and the General promptly took off straight up, then glided around and came back in to a landing. "You flew!" Muriel said.

"Yes. When I went home and the Air Force dead greeted me, they also had a fly-by. I went back and asked them how they did it. Well, for them it's simple. Being souls without a body, they aren't subject to gravity. But you did it, here. One of the Envoys told me you did, but that you didn't know how you did it. It's a different type of anchor, and not one made from your shield. You anchor to the universe." And Stuart sent a mental dump of how it was done. The dump opened up almost immediately, being a very small dump.

Muriel studied the procedure for a minute, then asked, "Can this anchor against the force of something hitting the shield?"

"It can hold against it while you're moving, which is even harder. I had Envoys test it using the same sort of force that you went through with your first test. Then kept increasing the mass. Which brings up another matter. To create the force, they created a shield that was moving at speed. In the case of the test, they started with five shields of the size and the equivalent mass of the bullets your squad aimed at you. They went all the way up to field piece size at the same speed, and couldn't knock me out of the air. The point is that you can use the shields like projectiles."

"May I ask, where'd you got the Envoys? I know none of my squads is missing."

"Oh, that," said Stuart. "The manager of the Guest House was very accommodating. He had staff that was off duty, and asked them if they'd like to help. I had fifteen Envoys out there in seconds. We went to that waste land to the West to try it out. Five of the Envoys acted as a safety net for the tests, just in case something got through and knocked me out of the air. Nothing did. This is solid, and may be a better anchor than you came up with Oops."

"Oops, nothing!" Muriel said. "If you can find a better way, then I'm all for it. I never claimed to be an expert. And we've had all sorts of people improve on what I started. Like, did you know that Envoys, having no bodies, fake them by 'painting' an illusion on themselves. This also is the reason that we can make our own clothes. They're actually a shield of specific types to hold an illusion. Stuff put in 'no pockets', though, are not necessarily like that, unless you're creating something that you don't have. Your breakthrough gives us more flexibility. It also keeps the Air Force in operation," she added with a grin. "And the fact that you had Envoys helping you means that this will be all over Enclave and Home very shortly. I can just see Envoys doing target practice out behind the building."

"Um . . . I hate to be the one to tell you, but one of your squads and one of mine are out back right now, with an Envoy version of paint-ball. And they've found a way to create a projectile that will go through shields," Ted said.

Bart appeared beside Ted and said, "No, the projectiles wouldn't go through the shields except that they pulled the shields in to make them look that way. Their accuracy has improved a lot since they started. I wouldn't be surprised to find that they could place a projectile of any size wherever they wanted shortly. Not that they could kill. But disabling vehicles and piercing buildings isn't killing people. No, I think the whole game just changed. Twice."

Chapter 18

A Time of War, and A Time of Peace (Thursday afternoon)

It's hard to believe that the very organizations that speak loudest about peace are the first to start a war when they are contradicted. That is, unless you look at the history of religions. Many of the strongest proponents of peace have had a history of anything BUT peace. So it was no real surprise that, once again, a delegation of religious persons was at the gate, this time with a lawyer.

It was Ted's turn to find out what the issue was, while at the same time alerting police and various other authorities. He also made contact with several lawyers that were willing to work for, and out of, Enclave. They were currently ensconced in Ted's old office. All except one, that would meet him at Reception.

As he walked up to the doorway to Reception, he could hear someone saying, "This is outrageous! We have every right to go in there. You can't keep us out."

"Sir," an Envoy said, "first of all there is a restraining order against you entering the property and grounds of Enclave. You're already standing on Enclave property and therefore guilty of trespass. You are also armed, which is against Enclave rules and those of this state, unless specifically authorized by the Ambassadors. You have no such authorization, nor, considering your animosity to us, are you likely to ever receive such authorization."

"Walter," a second man said, "I told you before. You should be quiet. In fact, you shouldn't even be here. And if you don't back off right now I will return this to the court and remove myself from the case."

"You wouldn't dare. You've been paid to do a job, and I'm the one that paid you. That makes ME in charge. Now do your job and get us in there."

Ted went over to Vincent, his attorney, and ask what was going on. "I haven't been able to find out," Vincent said. "We've checked with all the courts, city, state, county, and federal, both for criminal and civil and come up with nothing. Either the action hasn't been entered yet, which is highly unusual, or it's an illegal action. I won't know until I see what's going on."

Tex suddenly appeared beside Ted. "What's going on, do you know?"

"Not yet, Tex. I just got here, myself. Oh, Tex, this is Vincent. One of Enclave's lawyers. So far, I know that one of those religiosities is carrying a gun, despite the signs that are up at the entrance to the parking lot. So keep your shields up. I've got Vincent covered. Shall we go?"

They walked out of Reception and over to the gate. Immediately, the loud-mouthed Walter tried to get past the Envoy and bounced off a shield. "Is one of you an attorney?" Ted asked.

"Yes, sir. My name is Martin Lowe and I represent this group of ministers. A lawsuit has been filed against a Miss Muriel White and the organization known as Enclave citing slander. The exact details of the suit will be disclosed in court, of course."

"I think not. My name is Vincent Harper, attorney for Enclave and its residents. Now that the formalities are out of the way, Martin, you know very well that this is not the way it's done. First of all, the restraining order against the gentleman to your right cites the grounds and property of Enclave. The parking lot is part of such grounds and property, therefore he is in violation of a court order and guilty of trespass just by standing there."

"You can't do anything about it. This is a public space. In fact, all of your so-called Enclave is a public space," Walter declared.

"On the contrary, sir, this is private property, and it's at the discretion of the Ambassadors to allow or deny access, as they are the owners of the property. Now, second of all, Martin, you know that full disclosure of the details of a case takes place BEFORE it reaches court. And now, you are supposed to deliver a copy of the documents to me so I can determine the course of action that should be taken to defend my clients. The documents, please."

"Now Vincent," Martin said, "You know very well that your copy of the documents will be supplied by the court."

"Actually, I know no such thing. It is your responsibility to supply the documents in a timely manner. Martin, I know you, and I know you know better than to act like this. You're so far outside of legal procedure that I'd hazard a guess that you could be arrested as co-conspirator of a fraudulent action. Now, you want to try again? We do have police presence, here."

"Vincent, I'm under orders of my clients to take this action. And under orders of the court to deliver the paperwork only to the named individual. Oh, and my clients have insisted that they be along to ensure that it's done properly."

"Guys, take 'em. We'll sort this out at the station," Tex said. "Trespass and harassment for the least. More charges may apply. This one'll be up to the detail chief." This brought a chuckle from the group of men currently surrounding the ministers and their lawyer. "Ted, I'd like you and Vincent to come along, too, if you don't mind. I'd ask for Muriel, too, but I know she can't appear until we have these individuals disarmed and behind bars."

"That's all right, Tex. I'll alert her, and ask her to bring a lawyer of her own. Oh, and her parents, since she's a minor. Can't have you questioning her in a back room without an attorney and her parents in attendance," Ted said with a chuckle. "Got a visual? I'll meet you there."

"You can't do this," Walter said. "You're just rent-a-cops, not real police!"

"I'm sure the captain will be surprised to learn that the state police are rent-a-cops," Tex said. "He'll be so enthused that he might even treat you to dinner, tonight. I hear it's hash. Guys, make sure you get their identification and check them for weapons. I know this individual in front of me is carrying. Martin, I wouldn't blame you if you resigned from the case, but until it's official in front of a court, your it. I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to attend this little tete-a-tete. Can't have these desperadoes going without counsel, after all. I'd be glad to give you a lift and bring you back when they're safely tucked in."

"I think, if it's all the same to you, I'll take my car. Besides, I've got to tell the court why we won't be appearing, and that I resign from the case due to conflict of interest," Martin said. "Those people can get their own lawyers or take a court appointed one." He promptly left. Tex and his detail finished processing the ministers, then translated them as a group to the station.

While the ministers were being processed – fingerprinted, positively identified, formally charged with trespass and harassment, etc. – Ted went back to the office and initiated an investigation of the ministers and in particular their contact with any business that might be 'influencing' their behavior. Bart was way ahead of him, and half the list was already filled out. Ted also let Muriel know what was going on, and she agreed that she wouldn't appear until the ministers were safely out of the way.

Muriel checked with the lawyer's office and found that there was one that was assigned to handle any legal work that involved her. She met with the woman, a pleasant person who had been with a law firm for two or three years after graduation and passing the bar and had been displeased with being a 'second class citizen' there. She'd jumped at the chance to work for Enclave and the Envoys, and was astounded that she'd been asked to represent an Ambassador, and she'd be pleased to go with her to the state police station to lodge formal complaints and answer any questions.

Muriel then contacted her parents and explained the situation. She assured them that her request for them to be there was simply because she 'needed a chaperon' because she was underage. They agreed to meet her at the lawyers office and go with her to the station when Ted signaled that the way was clear.

It took an hour before Tex gave Ted the signal, and he passed that and the visual on to Muriel. Martin was there, but the ministers were, happily, missing. She was told that they were in holding, a portion of the station that had cells and was more than one hundred feet from the office area. Martin came up to her and immediately apologized for the fact that he'd been any part of the fiasco.

"This is NOT the way that legal proceedings are supposed to be held," Martin said. "I knew it, and complained to the judge before it was even initiated. But my grandfather, when he gets his robe on, seems to think that he has all the authority of a god. Well, this is my last 'official' act in this case. I resigned. It took a bit of work to convince gramps that I meant it. I

think it was when I said that, if he didn't accept my withdrawal from the case, I would lodge a complaint with the Bar Association, and with the Superior Court that convinced him that maybe he was wrong. So, here is the paperwork on the lawsuit." He handed it to her attorney.

"I want you to notice a couple of things," he went on. "First is the fact that the trial date had been set for today, about two hours after when I was supposed to inform you that you were being sued. In other words, insufficient time for you to put together a defense. The second is the nature of the lawsuit. It's for slander, yes. But not slander against any of the ministers, themselves. You have supposedly slandered god, or at least their idea of god, by saying that there is none and that 'heaven' is now being run by humans. This should have been thrown out immediately, since it isn't the principal that's charging you with slander, and would not be able to be called to court to testify as to the nature of the slander or show how what you said was untrue. They're basically saying that all you've said and done was a fake and a lie. I think their actual complaint is that you are a female, and a young one, that has 'set yourself up' as the head of the nation known as Home. Oh, I should mention that Walter is my uncle. He's trying to keep this in the family by having it in grandfather's court and me as the lawyer."

"Oh! This is classic," Muriel's lawyer said. "It's kind of the reverse of what a Senator tried to do in showing that there were too many frivolous lawsuits. Well, first, I think we can get this moved to a federal court, and the lawsuit thrown out on various grounds. That would just leave our charges against the individuals. Should it actually go to trial, having them prove their position, which they can't, would certainly cripple the lawsuit. In addition, can you prove that Home was, at one time, the place called 'heaven'?"

"Only by taking the court there so they can see the souls of those who have died here coming in to the place of judgment. Baring that, which might be considered a trick or mass hallucination, having an Envoy testify. But I can't see them accepting an Envoy as being a valid witness," Muriel said. "I'd welcome any suggestions in that line that you might have."

"Hmm. Let me think about it. I can see a couple of dodges already," her lawyer said. "First of all, what they are claiming is based on their religious belief. They can't establish anything as fact based on their own observation, or any concrete evidence. That, alone, might be enough to get it thrown out. If we also counter that we do not demand that others believe what you have said or done, then we are showing that there was no slander, but simply a difference in belief. And you are, under the constitution, allowed to have your own religious belief. Yes, I think we have a solid defense against them. You have a belief in something. That something, Home, exists. And you have evidence of its existence by going there yourself and by the testimony of others that have gone there. A philosophical argument, I'll admit, but I think I can make it stick."

"Now, there is one other thing you should think about," her lawyer went on. "Unless you want to have to go through something like this with every religion that takes exception to you, I think this should be publicized – put out for the media to follow. First, it will establish to the general public that what you say is true, and second it will establish, or reestablish, a concrete basis for moral behavior. Ethics, if you will. Think about it. Kick it around with Ted

and your Envoys and see what they say. If they agree, then I think we should do this as soon as possible. I'll help you with what to say to the media. And yes, I think it should be you. You're a woman – well, a girl starting to become a woman – that's been attacked by the establishment in an effort to put you down, put you 'in your place'. This sort of thing should be stopped. And I think you have the strength to do it, from what I've seen of your behavior under stressful situations. And I've seen the records of your accomplishments, so I know what I'm talking about. This is just another form of bullying, after all.”

“I have a question for you,” Muriel said. “Would I be allowed to bring my security chief and a squad to the trial?”

“I don't see why not. They wouldn't sit with you, of course, they'd have to be in the audience area. But they aren't armed.”

“In fact,” Muriel said, “the squad I intended to bring in looks like kids. As much as they hate to do it, I think I could convince them to stand in front of the court and, first, go to adult size and looks, and second, add wings. They HATE that, but they might do it to show continuity.”

“Oh, now that's just downright nasty. Especially if, as I've been led to believe, they also change from female to male. Can you get them to have a 'heavenly glow', too?”

“Oh, heck, even I can do that. And grow to ceiling height. I've used it once or twice for intimidation.”

Her lawyer just grinned. “I think we can sink them. You do realize that this may end up destroying a number of religions, though.”

“I know,” Muriel replied. “And that bothered me. Religions do serve some useful purpose. But being ganged up on by religions is getting tiresome. You might contact the parent organization for these . . . people . . . and see if it has the same feelings and/or has authorized their activity. Or even knows about it.”

“Hmm. I think I see where you are going. If this wasn't authorized by the parent organization, then they could end up defrocked. If it was, then THEY get dragged into this. Good thought. I'll contact them. Thanks. Oh, it's so good to work for a fighter. Especially one that fights dirty,” her lawyer said, grinning.

“Can we get the media into the courthouse so they can actually report what happens in there?”

“Well, as audience, I don't see why not. What some courts object to is cameras. When it reaches that point, I'll make a point of finding out and passing the information on to the media.”

“OK,” Muriel said, “is there anything else I'm needed for, here?”

“Not that I can think of, but I'll check.” Her lawyer went over to Tex and talked for a few minutes with him, then came back and said, “Nope. You mainly showed up simply to demonstrate our concern and support of Ted, and because you were named in the lawsuit.”

“Good. Then we can all go back to Enclave.” Muriel translated them all in front of the building the lawyers offices were in, said goodbye to her lawyer, and turned to her parents. “I'm sorry about calling you out. It turns out you needn't have come.”

“Oh, heavens, it was our place to be there. We are your parents, after all. And technically, you're underage and have to be represented by us. And we didn't mind. Today has been a quiet day. All our friends are off doing other things, and we were just wondering what we would do with ourselves, today. You gave us a break away from that,” her mother said.

“Besides, we're proud of you,” her father added, “and the way you handle things like this.”

“Well,” Muriel said, “it's all your fault, you know, constantly telling me that the only way out was through. So, now I keep looking for things I can get into so I can get through them.” Her father broke out in laughter at the thought of his daughter seeking a fight with a religion. It was too outrageous, in the face of the religion's having sought the fight with her.

Chapter 19

If You Wish for Peace, Prepare for War
(Thursday afternoon and Friday morning)

Muriel got back to her office to find it humming with activity. Even the off duty squads had managed to conjure up laptop computers and were busy. Her friends were on cell phones making calls to various locations, and she was concerned about what those locations were.

"Mata," she said, "what's going on? It looks like you're planning for a war!"

"Oh, we got some interesting information when we started looking at financial links to religions. They led us in all sorts of directions, including connections to politicians, businesses and, of all things, judges," Mata said. "Some of the kids are tracking down some of them by saying that they're doing a paper for school. Others are supplying that information to the media, who's lapping it up. This is going to blow wide open. Churches are supposed to stay out of politics. The whole 'separation of church and state' thing. But finding ties to judges really caps it all. They are supposed to be impartial. All four squads are researching as many links as they can find, and passing the information to either the kids or to Fred and his squad. You'd be surprised at where some of these links lead."

"Maybe not as surprised as you think. There have been rumors about a handful of families controlling everything."

"Well, guess what?" Mata said. "You're right. And the families seem to be connected, somehow. At least it appears to be that way. They seem to be acting in concert with each other. Oh, and not all of the families are in this country. Well, it's not really families, I guess. That's what we're trying to track down now. It seems like it's families, but the family connection may simply be a symptom of some other connection. Business, for example. And the reason we're beginning to think that is because there have been 'newcomers' in the group – people that weren't part of the original groups of families."

"So you're thinking that if we can show a connection upward to some group of people that appear to be controlling business, politics and religion, then we'll find out who's actually controlling the country, as well as kill off this stupid lawsuit."

"Not just this country, Muriel. Not just this country. And not just one religion. This is really big. A conspiracy theorist would have a field day, and not believe half of what we've found out. Ted may end up with a new contract from whole countries to act as the protective force before this is over. Someone or some group of people has been manipulating the minds of a great number of countries and playing them against each other."

"Then, it's time to find those people and expose them," Muriel said.

"And that's exactly what we're trying to do. Through financial links, business links, political links, and religious links. Through emails and social networking accounts. But it's slow work, fitting all the pieces together."

"So, how are the kids helping?" Muriel asked.

"Well, the ones saying that they're doing a paper for school are trying to pump the particular sources for information on what influences them, and how. We've already gotten a couple of hits off of that, information that led back to particular people that one wouldn't expect to be involved in anything like this. Upstanding people in the community that seem to be the epitome of morality. We've found links to insider trading and influencing businesses in what products are produced. Seems innocuous at first, until taken on a larger scale," Mata said.

"Take, for instance, the retired person who just happens to own a large block of stock through various proxies and means in a manufacturer of children's clothing. This manufacturer isn't based in this country, but is widely popular with parents and children. He suggests that the clothing could be made more attractive, and suggests some alterations. Suddenly the clothing industry is flooded with girls clothing that tends to show more skin or accentuate areas of her body that are not mature but are made to look more mature than her age. It doesn't take much to make impressions. And suddenly young girls are being looked at in more mature ways. He then goes to his religion and suggests that this is inappropriate, causing the churches to begin making accusations against the practice, thus advertising the very thing they should be putting down. This double influence seems to drive an underground of criminal activity involving children. Then the question comes down to 'does the individual profit in some way from this underground activity?' That's what we're looking for."

"We've had other cases where we know that arms manufacturers have promoted wars. Aside from the fact that arms manufacturers profit from such activity, directly, the wars seem to distract the public from what's going on under their noses, the clothing that their daughters are wearing, for example. Fred is having the time of his life. Every so often he comes out of his almost catatonic state to fire off two or three more suggestions for investigation, and the squads go crazy trying to track them down. It's a real circus in here. And don't even ask about big oil or the movie and music, and book publishing companies. Primarily, though, we're trying to concentrate on anything that might help you in this lawsuit," Mata concluded.

"Oh. I didn't mean to cause all this trouble."

"Honey, you didn't. This has been going on for centuries, at least. You aren't even the first focus from what we can tell. You just seem to be the first one that could trigger something that showed that it was widespread. And you just happened to have us available to find those links. And find them we will. All these hidden people and hidden agendas are going to splash all over the world. You don't even want to know how some of the religions have been manipulated."

"Is there anything I can do?" Muriel asked.

“Not right now. Maybe in the morning. Your friends are about to go home. Why don't you see them off, then go have dinner and relax. Tomorrow may be intense.”

She did as Mata suggested, listening to the excited kids as they told her what they were working on, and how successful they were, then seeing them off home. Their Envoys, of course, went with them. Then she translated to her apartment. All of her squad members were busy, it seemed, so instead of disturbing them she ordered something from one of the restaurants. One of their Envoys delivered it for her, and set it up at her place of the table, then stayed to see if there was anything else she wanted or needed.

She wasn't accustomed to eating with someone standing by her, so she asked him to sit and talk with her. And talk he did. It seemed that the whole of Enclave knew what her squads were working on, and how far they had traced the various individuals that seemed to control not only the American society but that of the world. A couple of times she asked questions that had the Envoy pause, then come back with an answer. Then she'd feel a flurry of mental activity from below her, and realize that she'd managed to suggest a slightly different angle from which to look at the data. The thought warmed her, some, to think that she was contributing to the search.

After the meal, and when the Envoy had left taking dishes and clutter and her thanks with him, she sat and watched TV for a while, noticing, for a change, the various commercials and trying to think how the various products were linked to other things. She quick jotted her thoughts down then, just before she went to bed, passed her observations down to Mata. She didn't think that they would be earthshaking, or even particularly helpful. After all, she was only a young girl.

The next morning she woke to find a full squad in her apartment and her privacy curtain drawn. That was enough of a clue to tell her to dress in something before she came out. Pajama-ed and dressing gowned, she caused the curtain to disappear and walked out to a most unusual sight. Her place at the table was decorated as if for a party, and the Envoys were wearing colorful, outlandish hats. She managed to get them to allow her her morning ablutions, then joined them, dressed in her Class A's.

“OK, what's this all about?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing much. Just celebrating the fact that our illustrious mistress has demonstrated, once again, why she's the leading co-leader of Home and the Envoys,” was the reply.

“Uh, huh.” She reached in a 'no pocket' and extracted a large shovel. A distinctive, though faint odor of equine byproduct trickled out. “And your next one?”

“OK, OK, put it away. No sense disturbing your breakfast with that smell. I'll talk. One of your questions last night caused Fred to jerk violently. And that linked list of commercials did it again. Both of them set him off on other tangents, like he'd been sent on a different route to the same destination on a map. He saw what you were trying to do, and completed it. He found the source – I mean, the current source, though without a doubt he can probably

show you the chain that led to this particular source.”

“It's inside Wall Street,” he went on, “and relatively untouchable, even by us. But Wall Street ISN'T untouchable. Shut it down and cause 'investors' to actually buy into the companies instead of trading stock, and it just might shut down some of the problems. Of course, it isn't just Wall Street. That's more of a symptom than the disease. The banks control the economies of all the countries by controlling the money. They have ever since the Great Depression, and maybe before, when they bailed each other out by buying them up and taking over the actual value of the dollar. It hasn't always been the banks, but in the last couple of centuries they've been a leader if not THE leader. The banks are also heavily into the stock market, manipulating it.”

“He got all that out of my little scribblings?” Muriel asked.

“He got more than that. He thinks he has a way to shut it down, and force the government to take back control of the currency. Basically, it's Ted's idea. The one he came up with when he was disgusted with that businessman. Force the stock down, buy up controlling interest and own the company, then take it private. Fire the upper management for incompetence and get it making a profit the REAL way. Do that with enough of the major companies and Wall Street becomes useless. He has a list of companies, in the order that they should be bought, ready for him to act on. Ted's already been working on the cut-outs, the proxies that he'd need to do it, and the Envoys he'd put into the management positions. It should start today, and he projects that the buyout could end Monday or Tuesday.”

“Isn't that going to take a lot of money, though?”

“Remember all that money he seized from that business manager that ran? That should take care of one company, even buying up the stock. Plus, a lot of the buying will be paperwork and not real money. Well, you'd have to see it in action. Ted says that he thinks Enclave can actually MAKE money on the deal. Something about using Wall Street's own rules against them. Actually making the companies profitable will take some time, unless we use Enclave techniques along with managers. But he's not worried about that. He just wants to get the leading companies out of the hands of the banks that control their stock, and away from the source of these problems. He thinks just doing that could smoke out the source. Then he has other plans.”

“I don't want to know the other plans, do I?” Muriel made the question sound like a statement.

“Well, worst case scenario, maybe not. But Ted sees a lot of paths that are possible. They all depend on how the source reacts. He's going to expose the manipulations that have taken place with those companies in a series of releases that each get closer to the source. He's also going to expose any underground activities of the source. From there, there are three ways that this could go. The government could step in and take action against the source, the people could get so disgusted with the mess that they take action. Or the source could try to strike back, probably violently. That's the worst one. That's where people could get hurt.”

“So, what can I do to help?” Muriel asked.

“Nothing right now. Around noon the media will be here, and we'll give you an idea of what to tell them. Then we just wait and watch the stock on some businesses crash. We buy it up through cut-outs and proxies that can't be traced back to us, then we force a board meeting and take over based on possession of the stock. That'll be Monday, probably. Then we buy out any outstanding stock for pennies on the dollar and fire the top level management. All that will be left will be line managers, and Envoys that are getting a crash course in management will be put in place of upper management.”

So Muriel dove into her Eggs Benedict and fruit, wondering why she was an Ambassador and co-leader when everyone else was more competent and did all the work. She didn't bother asking. She knew that they'd say she was the best qualified for the job. But she was beginning to think it was a set-up, that she was the front and target for someone else's agenda.

When she'd finished, she went to her office. Ted appeared as if he had a spy watching for when she got up. He came in and sat down across from her at her desk.

“You're worried,” was all he said.

“Yea. What if this doesn't work? What if people end up getting hurt. Why do I feel like the only reason I'm here is to be a target, a pawn?”

“All good questions. The answers are complex, but they essentially boil down to this – first, it's already working. The targeted companies stock is crashing right now. Second, people will get hurt, but it'll be financial, not physical, and even that we may be able to temper, some. Third, you are a target, but not a pawn. You've been a target since even before we recruited you. And you've always found ways to do things your way that surpassed anything I could think of. In a sense, you made yourself a target in order to keep others from being hurt.”

“Back to the 'people getting hurt' problem,” he added. “I know they won't be physically hurt, unless they hurt themselves, because we'll flood the area with Envoys and put shields on all of Enclave and anywhere else we can think of that might need them. We're protectors, first, last, and always. Oh, and as to how I know what's bothering you, Mata squealed,” he said with a grin. “A girl just can't keep any secrets around here,” he added, quoting her.

“So, what do I say to the media?”

“You tell them that some companies, important companies to the economy, are essentially bankrupt, as is evidenced by the crash of their stock today. It's down to pennies, now. Monday morning it'll be worthless.”

“But I'm not waiting for Monday. I've already got the cut-outs and proxies buying up the voting stock in bags full. By noon, I'll be able to force a meeting and replace the entire board

of directors of all of them. Tuesday, whatever stock is left will go up in value, but I hope by then that there isn't any outstanding stock, because Monday we'll own the companies and declare any outstanding stock to be worthless."

"What you'll be telling the media," Ted went on, "is that the companies will continue, but under new management. And that the Envoy Enclave Enterprises logo on the product will insure their quality. The current stock is delisted and will not be honored by the companies new management. In fact, by then I hope you will be able to hand out sheets with company names on them, and tell the media that Enclave now owns them on behalf of Home."

"Oh, and I've got a bank of phones and a group of Envoys to act as operators set up, because I expect that there will be a flurry of calls. The only ones that will get through to us are the ones that are the source of the problem, or very close to it. With them, you can be as nasty as your sweet, little self can be. No compromise. We run the companies, now, and they won't be getting any more kickbacks."

Chapter 20

Target Practice (Friday afternoon)

It took Ted two hours to go between six companies and inform them that they were no longer in the business of running – or ruining – the country. It helped that he had a small army of Envoys with him each time, and that they immediately took over, sealing offices of the major executives so that no valuable information could be lost. The next step for the Envoys was to take over the lead management positions, and to inform the lower employees that there would be an unscheduled two week paid vacation while the company reorganized.

At about two o'clock Muriel was told that the Media had arrived. What she saw outside her office was a much larger group of people and cameras than had ever shown up for news from Enclave before. And suddenly a rather prosaic use of what General Stuart showed her came into play. She rose up high enough that all the cameras would be able to see her without being blocked. She also amplified her voice so that all the microphones would be able to pick up what she said.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she said, "thank you for coming. Today six major companies experienced a major crash in their stock due to rumors of their insolvency. Poor planning, poor business practices and poor management resulted in their being unable to continue operation without a major influx of money. They had been existing on such an influx for some time, hiding it in their financial record so that the source wouldn't be noticed. The value of these companies to the country is incalculable. The actual value of the companies is almost nil."

"Not wanting to see the American economy go through another major catastrophe, Home has stepped in, through Enclave, to rescue the companies. Enclave has bought up the stock, through one means or another, and now owns those companies. The heads of the companies and the board of directors have been fired, upper management has been replaced, and the companies will continue as private enterprises. Those of you that may still have stock can either redeem it this afternoon at the market value set by Wall Street, or keep it as souvenirs of a mistake in judgment. As of Monday morning no more stock will be accepted for redemption."

"These companies have been in the habit of making minor cosmetic changes to their products and presenting them as major changes. At least the products actually do what they are supposed to, for the most part. However, no new products have been produced, and no real improvements to existing products has been made. This will change over the next month or so. For those that are looking for bargains, the price of the current stock will be reduced significantly. Any left when we roll out the new products will be gathered up and destroyed."

"We, both the Ambassadors of Home and the Envoys, are currently looking for the source of the funds that these companies were receiving with a view to bringing legal, criminal

charges against them for their interference. You will receive more information on that in the future. For now, the companies exist and will continue to exist but under a vastly reorganized plan of production and marketing. Taxes will be paid and general employees will, for the most part, continue to have employment. Thank you for coming.”

Muriel then descended to the ground and walked back into her office. As she passed Mata's desk, she asked, “Why do I feel that I just painted a target on my back?” Mata just grinned.

Mata followed her into her casual area and settled on the couch. “Muriel, you've painted larger targets on your back. That arms demonstration, for example. They threw everything they had at you, including tanks. Including that chain bomb. And you walked away from all of it.”

“Yes,” Muriel said. “But the difference is that they won't use weapons for this. They'll use rumor and innuendo this time. Stuff I can't fight against.”

“Oh, sure you can. Two words: prove it. And in the mean time we'll be looking into their history and finding the trash and exposing it, discrediting them. We can do this, Muriel. And we WILL protect you. It's what we took on as a job when we trained you.”

“You know,” Mata went on, “I think I know what's actually troubling you. In the time you've been here you've never really had time to just be a kid. To be outside Enclave doing what YOU want to do. Yes, you've got your friends around you, but you and they have been busy. Busy being more adult than most adults. Oh, sure, goofing and fooling around like kids, but not really engaging in what kids do. You need a break away.”

“Oh, sure. And how am I supposed to do that with this coming down on us?”

“Well, the phones won't start ringing until Monday. And even then you won't have many of the calls to take. Most of them will be from the small investors that suddenly found out that what they have is worthless and want to blame us. We can handle them. And if there's any real hardship situation, well, we can handle that, too. We're not ogres, Muriel. But we are out to stop the dangerous track that society has taken. We're out to protect the little guy and eliminate the violence. We're out to get civilization back on a Progressive path,” Mata said.

“No, for you, there won't be a lot of difference except the occasional phone call. And, for now, you've got free time until Monday. And even after Monday morning there should be time to be with your friends and do things. We can always transfer essential calls to your phone. But I can't think of any that would be that important that we had to disturb you, right off hand.”

“Now,” Mata said, “as for what you can do – and yes, I heard that 'but there's nothing to do' in the back of your mind – you've got some new skills thanks to General Stuart. You've got twelve friends that need to work off some energy. You've got a whole wasteland on that back side of Enclave that you can use to come up with some sort of game.” A ball suddenly

appeared in her hand and was tossed to Muriel. "If you can't think of something to do, then you're not as inventive a group of kids as I think you are. I'm betting you are, and you'll have a crowd of Envoys watching you before you've even got all the rules worked out. Go work off some of that energy."

Fifteen minutes after Muriel and her friends literally flew out of the office the wasteland was surrounded by Envoys. Envoys that could think up any excuse to be not working at the time. Hundreds of them watching what amounted to a three dimensional version of hockey, but without the glass walls to push someone into. And no fights. The kids were laughing.

Right off the bat Muriel had ordered that there was to be no translating. Bouncing off each others shields was acceptable, but the possibility of two people trying to translate to the same point at the same time filled her with horror. And the kids agreed. In addition to the whole game being played above the ground, there was also the fact that the ball could be propelled like a projectile. That made the position of goal tender rather dicey. They flattened two balls before it was decided that there should be a limit to the velocity of a propelled ball. Also, after one goal was found to have been covered with a shield, it was decided that only personal shields would be permitted.

As the crowd grew around them, they also realized that they should be protected, just in case there were untrained humans among them. Muriel called a halt to the game at that point and they built a rectangular shield that could be bounced off of. Not all of the kids were in the air at one time. They'd divided up into teams and changed the colors of their uniforms so they could easily be told apart. And then the war began. Two hours of mayhem and madness, and daring saves and spectacular goals. And laughter.

When they all trooped back into Muriel's office the mood was much lighter. And no one noticed the Envoys that took to the air behind them. Mata just smiled to see the sparkle in Muriel's eyes and hear the chatter of the kids as they recounted portions of the game, still laughing. Muriel dropped into her recliner and stretched out.

"OK, Mata. You were right. And we had fun. Now, I've got to think of how to make it more difficult."

"Why? What I saw being sent back by some of the onlookers certainly looked difficult enough," Mata said.

"Oh, it was, for a start. But somehow I think it could be tougher. Take more skill. What we were doing out there was mostly hacking and bashing. And there ought to be more teams."

"Don't worry about that," Mata said. "When you left some of the Envoys started in trying to play. They're using your rules, including protecting spectators. And they're getting just as crazy as you kids were. We're going to have to build stands around the field. Once this gets out we'll have humans coming in just to watch the game. In fact, we should probably call the media in to do what they call a 'human interest' story on the kids that play games in the air. If nothing else, it'll distract some of the people from thinking that you had anything to

do with Ted's takeover of the businesses.”

“Now there's a thought,” Muriel said. “Let Ted handle his own phone calls from people who are upset with him taking six companies private, so they can't make money off of them.”

“You may still get called in to help with that, you know,” Mata said.

“Oh, I know. Which means I'll be out of the games for a while.” Muriel paused and thought for a bit. “Mata, don't call the media in for us kids playing the game. Let's see how the Envoys do at it, and call the media in for them. I can be shown as the coach for the game, or referee, or whatever. But I think we should keep these skills quiet for a while, at least as far as the kids and I are concerned.”

“What are you thinking?”

“I'm thinking that what we were doing out there could have applications if a war breaks out. I know we can catch and throw projectiles that are subsonic. Probably ones that are supersonic, too. It'd be disconcerting to an army to have their own ammunition sent back to them. Shields something like the scoops in Jai Alai. Directed reflection to take out arms without killing people. Or to just raise enough of a wall of dust in front of the troops to keep them from being able to aim. Something.”

“Interesting. Take it up with Ted. Here, take a copy of the record of what you kids did to show him, then talk to him about it. I can see positive both ways, maybe he can sort out which way would work best.”

Muriel slowly got up off the recliner and took the CD. “You really think that something could be made of this?”

“Honey, people would PAY to watch that. Even just as it was. You've created a whole new sport, and one that ISN'T dangerous to the participants or spectators. But one with all the excitement of any of the sports. And fast? I haven't heard any announcer that could keep up with it.”

“OK, I'll go talk to Ted.”

She showed Ted the record, and his eyebrows went up. Then she talked about what Mata had suggested and her own opinion. And waited. Ted sat back and thought for a few minutes while Muriel fidgeted in frustrated excitement. Finally, he seemed to come back into focus and look at her.

“I can see possibilities both ways. You're right, that this could have applications in a war. But Mata has a point that it would get you kids LOOKING like kids. Just out for a lark. Just goofing off and playing. I think that outweighs the possibility of giving away secrets that could be used against a potential enemy. It also would tend to take you out of the line of fire, take the target off your back, if you will. It'll make you look like 'just a kid', and therefore not a threat. Of course, we could end up with a whole new batch of people wanting to get trained

so they could learn how to do this. Kids, especially,” Ted said. “No, I think that the uses in warfare would be limited compared to the public relations and good that could come out of it being exploited as a game. If you're up to it.”

“As long as we don't have to get serious about it. It could destroy friendships that way. This HAS to stay a lark, a way to let off steam, a way to have fun.”

“Oh, I agree with that wholeheartedly,” Ted said. “For the warfare aspect, take it to General Stuart, and let him decide. Oh, here, let me make some copies of it. I think the media would like to see how kids with training let off steam.”

Muriel focused on General Stuart and asked for a visual. She found him with a crowd around him, and the only access was from outside the crowd. She translated, then walked up to the back of the crowd.

“Excuse me, please. Oh, sorry, could I get past, please? I need to see the General.”

Whispered comments of 'it's her' preceded her, and suddenly a path opened up directly to the General. He seemed to be watching something in the air. In fact, all of them seemed to be watching something up high. She looked up, and saw a group of Air Force personnel flying in formation over the field.

“General Stuart? Hi. I thought you might like to see this. Some of us kids were goofing around and played a game. I think it might be of some use to you,” Muriel said, and handed him the disc.

“What kind of game, Muriel?”

“Oh, we played something like hockey or basketball, but in the air and a lot faster than either of those games is generally played.”

“Hmm. Sergeant, call them in. I'll be in my office.” the General gave Muriel the visual, and they both translated. Sitting at his desk, he put the disk in the computer and watched for a few minutes. “Whoa! OK, I see why you thought it might help us. Definitely. Oh, my gosh! Fur-ball. And at speeds and tight quarters that our best jets couldn't manage. That's quite a dog fight, there. How are you managing to make the ball move that fast?”

“Oh, we propel it like it was shot out of a cannon, or something. Subsonic. We didn't want to destroy the ball all the time. As it was we had to make two new ones. For us, it's just a game, a way of letting off steam. I wondered about applications in warfare, and Ted suggested I leave that side of it to you,” Muriel said.

“Hmm. Is there a chance that I can bring these trainees down to watch you, sometime?”

“No problem. We'll even give them their stripes, if you haven't already and want them to have them,” she replied.

“Oh, they'd love that. Especially if you were the one to present them. These are good guys, and really enjoyed the training. They also have seen what you've done with it, yourself, and were impressed. And they know that you trained me. Well, with help,” he said with a smile. “When would be a good time?”

“Tomorrow morning? I'd say today, but I think the kids may be a bit tired. If they feel anything like me, I'm sure of it. So, tomorrow morning, we'll give them their stripes and show off for them. Have they all been Home?”

“Yep. Yesterday, in fact.”

“Then they'd all be eligible for a Home passport, too. If I could have names and pictures, then we could have them ready for them, along with their certificates of citizenship,” she said. “We'll even treat them to lunch,” and she grinned.

“You've got a deal. About eight o'clock?”

“Sounds good. Would you mind having the media there, too?”

“Well . . . we're trying to keep it quiet that we're training. But if you mean for your demonstration, I don't see that as a problem.”

“Good. Then it's a date. I'll have my friends primed for it. And maybe some Envoys, too. Apparently they were trying it after we left the field. I'll get back and see what I can get set up for you. Maybe even some training for your troops, if you like.”

“Oh, oh,” Stuart said. “THAT sounds dangerous.”

“Well, we'll try not to damage them TOO much,” she said with a grin. “Just tell your people to keep their shields up.”

Chapter 21

Fur-ball

(Saturday morning)

As with any plan, it fell apart with the first engagement of the 'enemy', and the media was eating it up. High above them were several Envoys engaged in trying to capture the ball and move it toward a goal. Which goal depended on which color Envoys captured it. Like the kids the afternoon before, they'd colored their uniforms to make it easier to show friend from foe.

The Airmen had come in as planned, and received their stripes, and only the media didn't know that they had them. But they did, and they walked tall. They'd done some close order drill in the air, and formation flying. But this was totally foreign to them, and they were eating it up.

Suddenly, the ball popped up, and one of the gold team shot toward it, only to be bounced back by someone from green. And just as suddenly, the ball went for the goal defended by gold, at about 150 miles per hour. The goalie caught it in time – just – and held it to create another face-off. There was a grin on his face a mile wide.

Muriel and Stuart were off to the side, away from the crowd a bit, and talking about the application of what was happening in the air. The general got it. A jet, particularly one of the fast movers, could be knocked out of the air by a propelled projectile, sent by someone that appeared to be defenseless and walking in the air. A fur-ball of Airmen could take out a radar plane or unmanned reconnaissance vehicle with no trouble. And, of course, no damage to the Airmen.

Shortly after, it was time for the kids to show off. What had seemed to be a fast paced game with the Envoys became something almost too fast to follow with Muriel and her friends. Strategies and plays had been set up, with alternatives to account for that engagement factor – the fact that the enemy never does what you want him or her to do. Fur-balls lasted no more than five to ten seconds. Attackers kept the ball in motion, so that no single person could be mobbed, sometimes even firing it behind them to draw the defenders back, only to see the ball go either over their heads or under them. In what would have been considered one quarter in any other game, the ball managed to make points for each side, until at the end of that time the score was tied, and laughing kids were rolling around in the air, holding their sides.

And the media ate it up. Muriel, who had been on the ground acting as referee and time-keeper, went and talked to the media. She downplayed it as being anything of importance, simply a way to let the kids use up some of their excess energy and have some fun. No, the kids had come up with it themselves, as kids often would. Some of it came from some movie with kids on broomsticks. But most of the idea was actually taken from hockey, only modified for three dimensions, and with less rules.

"And now you know how talented kids let off steam," she concluded with a smile. Her gentle voice and quiet ways convinced everyone that, of course, she must be telling the truth. She then walked away with a waive to the cameras and led the general and his troops back to her office.

Once they were inside and out of range of the microphones of any stray media people, she asked, "So, what do you think? It is something worth pursuing?"

"Oh, definitely. How fast can you make those projectiles?" he asked.

"I hold the kids to subsonic. We lost two balls before I ordered that. Even at subsonic, if the ball hit something solid, that didn't have the elasticity of the shields, it would flatten. But a solid projectile? You'd WANT it to do as much damage as possible. And your troops would have fun playing Superman."

"Still want to teach my troops how to do it?"

"And you, too," she replied, "unless you're afraid it would tarnish your image with them to train right along with them."

"Stuff that. They know this is all new, and they know that I at least like to know what the troops are up against, by learning how to do it myself. No, the ones that will be the problem are the actual pilots, if any of them are trainable. I'm doing this with enlisted men first so that if the officers look down their nose at me I can point to them and what they can do, and suggest that they're too much the coward to try, much less learn."

"Yea, the kids made me sit out the 'war' yesterday. They didn't want me to get hurt. As if. I've been doing more dangerous stuff than just about any of them, except Don. But no, they wouldn't let me. I did, however, get enough air time to be able to understand what they were doing, and how they were doing it," Muriel said.

"I'll keep you informed on our progress. You can even come up and train with them, if you like and your duties allow."

"I'll keep that in mind. Oh, and I kept them from translating while airborne, because of the possibility in close quarters of two people ending up in the same place. What I didn't tell them is that it's possible to translate a projectile."

"Ah. I wondered at that omission. I can see where that would be deadly to an aircraft, if suddenly the engines were plugged with lead."

"Kinda what I thought. Or even a large rock. If it were translated directly into the engine, not just in front of it, it would probably cause an explosion that would take out the wing, and maybe part of the fuselage."

"Depends on the type of plane, but I see your point. Yes, that definitely wouldn't be

good for its ability to fly. And rocks are cheaper than ammunition. THAT should put a kink in the budget.”

Mata suddenly asked, “Were either of you expecting anyone?”

Muriel looked out her window. “Not anyone I know. General?”

“Me, neither,” he said.

::Ted, we've got unexpected company. Looks like he's coming to my office.::

::I'll be right there.::

The man was still approaching when Ted appeared behind him. “Stop where you are, and state your business.”

“None of yours, flunky. I have orders to give something directly to your boss.”

“I'll bet. However, I think we'll just find out a bit more before you even attempt it.” Bart and two other Envoys appeared in front of the man, then translated him out of the street.

“We'll find out soon enough who he is and what he wants,” Ted said. “Bart said that if all else fails, they'll 'pull a Muriel': take him Home and put him on the place of judgment. And if that fails they'll crash force his mind, and get it that way. He was carrying something lethal. Something like a knife, but not metal, and coated with something.”

“Oh, my. Haven't people seen enough of me in action to realize that it isn't the speed of the object that determines whether or not it gets stopped, but is simply anything I don't allow inside the shield?”

“Some people don't understand that force is NOT the answer to everything,” Stuart said. “That's what happened at your demonstration. They just kept throwing more and more force at you, thinking to overwhelm you. You don't intimidate worth a darn,” he said, smiling.

“Well, flunky,” Muriel said to Ted, “while you're up, why don't you get the coffee.” She giggled.

“Actually, that didn't bother me as much as detecting that knife-like object with its coating. Probably poison,” Ted replied, grinning ruefully. “I wonder why he targeted you and not me, though.”

“Probably because I was the one that made the speech to the media, yesterday. And not many people know what you look like. Even less know the differences in the uniforms, or what they signify,” Muriel responded. “That could contribute to his thinking you were an Envoy and therefore a flunky. As if they were. What about police,” she added.

“Already called and on the way. Bart knows not to move the whatever it is from the

person until they arrive. We've got a hot-line to three agencies, and a fight is going on as to who shows up," he grinned. "It's nice to have friends in the business."

"Are you talking about me?" said a friendly voice, and Henry Richards stepped into the room.

"Well . . . I guess the FBI will do," Ted replied. "He's next door with Bart. Bart's trying to find out who he's working for. We haven't removed whatever it was that looks like a knife with a coating of something. He should be bringing him back, soon."

"Any reason why you left it with him?" asked Henry.

"Yep. I figure he's going to try to attack Muriel with it. Then you've got him for assault with a deadly weapon. Then check what's on it and find out what it is."

"Oh, and you want him to do it in front of a law enforcement officer. Nasty," Henry said. "I like it. Muriel, I know I'm probably asking a ridiculous question, but if he hands you something, can you keep a shield between it and you, and still make it look like you took it?"

"Oh, sure. I do that all the time with people I don't know or know very well. Like Ted."

Ted sputtered. "What do you mean, 'like me'?"

"Oh, well, a girl can't be too careful about strange men. And there's none stranger."

Now Ted sounded like he was being strangled. "One of these days, girl, you're going to get it."

"See what I mean, Henry. I just can't trust him. He's already making threats against poor, little, underage me. Oh, WHAT am I to do with people like that surrounding me?" Muriel placed the back of one wrist dramatically on her forehead as she said that. And Henry laughed.

It was just unfortunate that Bart brought the individual in at that moment. "OK, Muriel, he's all yours. He has an envelope or something that he's supposed to give you."

"OK. Well, where is it?" she asked the man.

He pulled it out of an inside suit coat pocket and handed it to her. As soon as she had it and he released it, something popped out and stabbed at her wrist. "Now you're for it, you Jezebel. You'll meet your judgment, now. You'll be dead in the next few minutes."

"Well, in that case, I might as well sit down and relax," Muriel said, and suited action to words. "In the mean time, Henry, why don't you do the honors. This is obviously the device he intended to kill me with. So, let's see, assault with a deadly weapon, assault with intent to kill . . . are there any other charges?"

"Oh, they'll do for now. There may be others, like traveling on forged documents or something. I'm sure we can come up with something to keep him away from society for a while. Would you happen to have something appropriate to put that thing in so fingerprints are preserved and no one gets stuck on it?"

"I'm sure Mata can come up with something. Like a large envelope and some sort of steel container to hold it. I'd do it, but I want to conserve my strength for my big, dramatic death scene. When did you say I was going to die?" Muriel asked the man.

"You should BE dead by now. That's a mix of some of the deadliest poisons and venoms in the world."

"Ah. Well thank you. That's quite a compliment, using all that stuff on poor little me. Oh, Henry, can you add attempted child abuse to that?"

"Why, thank you, Muriel. I totally forgot that you're underage. Yes, I'm sure that that can be included."

"Well, since I don't seem to be dead, and I had my judgment weeks ago, I suppose we're all finished here," Muriel said, and stood up. "Mister, we haven't been introduced, and I really prefer to know who it is that's killing me. I don't expect it, but it would be only polite. Oh, and I think you might think less of your boss. He had to have known that there was no way you could escape from the heart of Enclave after trying to kill me. You were thrown away, like a piece of used toilet tissue. Just flushed down the toilet. You could help your boss achieve what he's earned by letting me know at least HIS name. No? OK, Henry, he's all yours." Henry, the perpetrator and the evidence all vanished, leaving just a mystery behind.

"Bart, did you manage to learn anything from him?" Ted asked.

"Bits and pieces. Mostly enough to know that he doesn't really know anything. He was just told to deliver it. He did know what it was, but thought he could lie his way out of it and get away. I did get the feeling, though that the source of this threat isn't in America, since he made at least two trips overseas recently. The device, however, was made here."

"You know," Stuart said, "It really was remiss of all the media to desert you just when you could have used their help. Letting the world know that a 'mere girl child' was attacked in such a way might have been useful."

"Only if we wanted to start a rumor war," Muriel replied. "And I'll get you for that 'mere girl child' crack."

"No you won't. The opinion wasn't mine, but what various other powers that be would consider you," Stuart shot back. "They consider anyone that isn't them to be some sort of inferior species. And the lower in their opinion a particular class appears to be, the less they think of them. Think about it. They obviously don't know who or what Envoys are, or their abilities, so they discount them. And because they discount them they don't try to find out who or what Envoys and their abilities are. Vicious cycle of circular reasoning. Then there's

you. Female, child, each knocks you down a notch in their estimation. Hence, 'mere girl child', which they consider unable to think and reason, as well as unable to actually get and use the training."

"You got all that from that brief exchange?" Muriel asked.

"It's what got me where I am. The ability to quickly determine the opponent's weaknesses and exploit them."

"But, would those higher up than this throw-away think like that?"

"I think so," said Stuart. "Simply because he wasn't the one that orchestrated the hit on you. He simply carried it out. Oh, he may have made the device, but only because others felt that it would be successful. I'd venture to say that, all the way to the top, none of them has bothered to see the videos of you in action, or they would have been smart enough to not try. And, of course, there aren't any videos of Envoys using the same techniques, so they had nothing to compare your actions to, even if they had bothered to look. They consider you to be beneath them, therefore not worth noticing."

"So, how do we get to the ones that are higher up the line?" Muriel asked.

Mata perked up, and said, "Financials. Also communications. Henry just sent back the positive identification and aliases on our mystery man. The team is running them, now. We may have something a little later. Oh, and your friends are headed this way looking happy, and the General's troops are following, looking grim and dangerous. If that means anything to you."

"Oh, oh. I'd better head off my troops. I think I know what's coming," Stuart said, and translated outside. "Sergeant, assemble the men outside. I'll speak to them, there."

"Muriel," Don spoke at the same time the General did, "they never tried playing anything like this, and they want to learn. They also want to know why they were never taught this."

"Uh, huh. I thought as much. OK, gang. Outside. Don, you're with me. And speak only when I ask you a question. I think we can solve this in a hurry."

Everyone trooped out into the street. The Airmen formed up in two rows with the first row seated. The kids gathered around the sides.

"Gentlemen," the General said, "if you have a beef, it's with me. I didn't know about this game until yesterday, when the Ambassador kindly invited us to come out. And now that I've seen it, I'm as anxious as you that you should learn it."

"General, if I may," Muriel said, then moved up beside him. "Look, we're kids. We don't know what we don't know. And sometimes we make things up on the spur of the moment. In this case, your General had taught me how to fly, but it didn't really mean

anything to me until yesterday when I was bored and had nothing to do. So my security chief tossed me a ball and told me to go out and play.” This brought some chuckles from the troops.

“I hadn’t taught the kids to fly, at that point. I didn’t see a reason to. But I taught them yesterday, and handed them the ball to work with, learning how to fly and catch it, and toss it to others. The next thing I knew, they’d formed up teams, put up the two rings, and proceeded to go at it. Partway through, one of them set out and let me take her place. And I haven’t had so much fun in years.”

“Now,” she went on, “we invited you out here to see the game. First with the Envoys playing against each other, then with my friends playing. It’s been my intention, all along, that I could pay the General back for teaching me to fly by showing you the game and giving you the opportunity to learn, here. However, if you’re going to be grumpy about it, we’ll cancel this afternoon”

“NO!” came the combined shout from the troops.

“No? OK, then after lunch and a break to let it settle, we’ll go out to the field and see what we can do. Now, I notice that there are ten of you plus one sergeant. And that just doesn’t come out even. So, to help out, I’ll take five of you and your sergeant can take the other five. We’ll leave General Stuart out of this. We don’t want him to get his uniform dirty, after all.” This crack brought laughter. “So, let’s go to lunch, and we’ll see what goes down from there. I’m going to invite my friends to come along, too. You might pick up some pointers from them. Don’t be afraid to ask them questions.”

The men were dismissed, and sizing the kids up, started moving toward them according to their inclinations as to what part they could play, and what they had seen the kids do in the air. The sergeant, a big, burly man, came over to Muriel.

“Not now, sergeant,” she said. “For one thing, I went in as a troop, not as a team leader. I’d have to get with Don and find out how he organized it, myself.”

“But . . . you’re an Ambassador! Surely you should have had the lead position.”

“But . . . ,” she replied, “I’m a kid, and these are friends. And though I led them before we were trained, I never felt that I was better than they were or that I couldn’t learn from them. Taking a lower position gave me the opportunity to play, to try it out. Don was the one that came up with the something special that made what even the Envoys did look tame. And I’ll have to learn what it was from him. Right along with you.”

“Oh . . . ,” he said.

“Don’t be disappointed, sergeant,” Stuart said. “I’ll have to wait to learn any of it, myself.”

“So, let’s go to lunch,” Muriel said.

Chapter 22

Fur Flies

(Saturday afternoon)

As they moved out from the street, the General said to Muriel, "That was well done. You put them back in line, and gave them something to look forward to. Where'd you learn how to do that?"

"Self-defense. When you herd cats, you have to have an idea of which way they'll jump. So, I started by laying it on the line, just how the game came about, and when. Then made as if I were going to take that prize away from them. That got them focused. Actually, the hardest part of this afternoon will be getting them to NOT take it seriously. And while I'm teaching them, you can be thinking of where you're going to have them practice this, or whatever warfare application develops from this, when you get back to base," she said.

"Yes, and you can think about what you're going to tell the media when they demand entrance, on the realization that the Air Force was here and might want to know how to do this," he replied. "We haven't let out that ANY of us are trained."

"Then we'll keep it that way. I'll make sure that Mata and Reception know that I'm busy, and will get with the media when I have time," Muriel said. "Then, when I do, if they ask about you, I'll refer them to you. I have no authorization to talk about military matters or contracts. Nor would my friends, being children, be allowed in any war zone."

"Oh, THAT'S cold. You're implying by that statement that we AREN'T trained, and that I'm trying to contract with you for people. That's a good one."

"I thought you'd like that," Muriel said. "Then all you have to do is say 'no comment'. The rumor mill can go where it wants, the legitimate media will just report it flat, without drawing any conclusions for which they don't have any evidence."

Lunch was held at one of the general restaurants that dotted the main area of Enclave. With the number of visitors and guests that were in the area, it was unwise to translate in. Besides, with General Stuart's inclination to keep the training quiet, translating in public was unwise. So, they very prosaically walked. Fortunately, it wasn't far – General Stuart wasn't used to walking.

The restaurant had a section arranged for them when they entered. Some visitors grumbled about the massed entrance, and were shushed by those that recognized Muriel as an Ambassador. Apparently, on the walk over, teams had been chosen and positions selected, because once they hit the restaurant they broke into groups that could discuss the training and the roles each would play. Thus, Muriel found herself surrounded by General Stuart, Don, and the sergeant, who would act as the other team leader and forward.

The discussion was good . . . and quiet. All of it was held mentally, except for chuckles and outright laughter at times. Each of the kids dumped what they knew into the respective troops as they sat down, then planning and examples were passed as normal mental sends. When they got up they knew they'd eaten, but had only a vague idea of what.

Don took Muriel aside and added another short dump. The key that kept his side winning and doing spectacular things in the air – the way to create a mental link that almost became a single mind of its own, a hive mind. This was something he'd picked up from the Envoys – his own and some of her squad members. The other team leaders knew how to do it, too, and this was what made the kids fur-balls so spectacular to watch, and, according to Don, so nerve wracking to accomplish. But against a team that didn't have that skill yet, it would be devastating. Don cautioned Muriel to not give the information to the other team leader until AFTER they'd gone up against them. And to try to get some practice in before actually using it herself.

Again they walked, this time to the field, in order to let their lunch settle. Her team decided to show off a bit, and got in step with her. She wasn't hitting the traditional 120 beats per minute, but that didn't seem to bother them as they stepped out, shoes hitting the pavement in lock-step, and one of them calling cadence. She had a hunch that she'd drawn a team that could be as goofy as her friends, and that was fine with her. She had a couple of ideas about showing off, herself. Someone else handed her a hat and told her to wear it – it wouldn't blow off behind her shields, and he showed her how to wear it properly.

She switched to her utility uniform, and somebody in back shouted, “Yea! NOW we've got a leader,” and Stuart grinned at her. Now that they were away from the visitors and guests, the rest of the troops switched to their version of utility uniforms, but in gray. The other team did the same, but in blue. And somebody else shouted, “Theh Saouth shall Rahz Agin!” which brought laughter from the whole troop.

Despite the marching and the cadence calls, Muriel explored the hive mind that Don had suggested. She felt the connections with the rest of the team, and got them to make their own connections between them. Then discovered that they already had. It was how they were keeping in step. She reached into that mass, and learned the commands for left, right, and halt, and the confidence to know when to use them. Then she tapped an amateur flier who had had some experience in jets, and learned how to form up the team and put on a bit of flash for their take-off.

When they reached the field, Muriel created a chair for the General, and suggested, firmly, that he sit down. Then she marched her team out to the field and faced her opponents. The sergeant had his team set up as a rectangle with him at the right end of the first row as she faced them. She marched her team to face them, halted them, and gave them the mental command to change to the wing or 'V' formation of aircraft. The sergeant looked quizzically at her, but gave the command for his team to go airborne.

Then, it was her turn. She raised her right arm, gathered her team with her mind, dropped her arm and took off. Two men immediately took off behind her, and three followed them – they mounted the air, straight up, at one hundred fifty miles per hour in wing formation.

When all were clear of the ground, and half again as high as the other team, she executed a perfect Immelmann and flew directly away from the other team, and her team followed her as if they'd practiced it for hours or days. Then she had them dive, pull another climb and Immelmann so she was back at the same altitude as the opposing team, bringing them to a halt, at attention, twenty feet from that team.

As a last bit of flash, her voice rang out, "Parade Rest!", and six left feet snapped out to shoulder width and hands went behind their back. And poor General Stuart was VERY happy he was sitting down, or otherwise he'd have fallen over laughing. The laughter increased when Muriel promptly stuck her tongue out at the Sergeant. His muttered comment of "Showoff" was somehow amplified over the area. But that got his team's blood up. And Muriel knew that she was going to be in for a fight. Troops designated as goalies took their positions and the rest of the teams formed up on their captains.

Ted had come out to the field, carrying the ball – you couldn't have kept him away with a stick – and tossed it straight up between the teams. Muriel feinted toward it, then popped straight up. And the war was on. One of her team moved below the ball and the congestion that surrounded it. When he reached that point, a team mate managed to get ahold of it long enough to send it straight down to him, and he fired it at the opposing goal. Muriel went in pursuit, and fended off opposing defenders by the simple expedient of body checks to their shields. Then she flew under the ball and ahead of it, screening it from the goalie long enough to confuse him out of position. She popped back up just ahead of the ball, and it sailed through the ring and stuck in the sticky net shield.

Ted retrieved it as the teams formed up for another face-off. This time, Muriel stayed in the fur-ball, battling for possession, and her team orbited the outside. Her awareness of where they all were, and where they would be in the next few seconds, felt uncanny, but she went with it, popping the ball in a curve that intersected the path of a team mate so he could fire it at the goal. This time, two team members went after it, deflecting defenders and causing the ball to go through all sorts of interesting changes in flight. That is, interesting if you weren't the poor confused goalie that was trying to figure out where it would be coming from. Once again, the ball sailed through the ring and stuck in the net.

Ted again retrieved the ball, but motioned the teams down. As soon as they landed, Muriel went to the sergeant and showed him what she had done and how to do it. "Communication is the key," she said as she explained how it worked. He took his team aside, and taught them what she'd shown him, then worked with them a bit on plays and how to stay focused on where everyone was.

When they mounted the air again – this time a little less dramatically – and Ted tossed the ball up the resulting fur-ball went on for five minutes. Finally, someone got hold of it long enough to try to fly it out, was hit by an opponent, and the ball went out of bounds. The teams re-formed and tried again on Ted's toss.

And so it went for a high energy half hour, at which time Ted called them all back in. Troops collapsed on the ground and Muriel was breathing hard as she went over to Ted and the General. It took her some time to catch her breath.

“Well, General? Think you can use something like that?” she finally managed to gasp out.

“Are you KIDDING ME! Just your lead-off would have the powers that be drooling. The fur-balls would have them wetting their pants. Yea, I can see applications for this. Starting with recruiting, and ending with bloodless warfare. And to think a bunch of kids thought this up.”

“I ought to send Don and his team up against one of yours to show you what it's REALLY like,” she said. “Except that it would demoralize your troops to lose to kids.”

“Let them take a break, then do it. Against both teams, one at a time,” the General said. “Do them good to get knocked down a peg or two, and they'd try harder to try to beat them the next time. Oh, man, the exhibition matches we could hold. Air Force might even become profitable and self-supporting just off this.”

Muriel looked over at the troops – teams no longer. They had mingled and were swapping stories of what they'd done and seen. And laughing. At themselves, at each other, at the fact that enlisted men had just outdone officers and pilots. At the realization that they were the front, the wedge, that would change the way air combat was performed. Muriel smiled.

Mata appeared. “Muriel,” she said, “the media just caught on to the potential for the Air Force, and are demanding information.”

“OK, I'll cover it. They're at the gate?” At Mata's nod, Muriel said, “Let me get changed back into the Class A's and I'll go talk to them.”

“Oh, stay in utilities,” Mata said. Ted nodded his agreement. “Everyone knows that you can change in an instant, and you're an Ambassador. What you wear is up to you. By the way, the hat looks nice.”

“I'm thinking of changing it to black leather. That would shake them up, to see me as a 'black hat'.”

“Naw. You're definitely a 'white hat'. But leave it as it is for now,” Mata said. “Just go cool them down. They think we put something over on them.”

“They weren't able to see us flying around, were they?”

“Nope. But the choppers are up, now, and could see over the wall. So, you might want to knock off for a while,” Mata replied.

“OK, Ted? Can you keep them company for a while?”

“I'll do better than that. I'll put the kids back in the air, but dressed in the Air Force

style utility uniforms. If anyone DID see what was going on, we can always say they just saw the kids, and that they were trying out new uniforms.”

Muriel grinned, then disappeared. She popped out about ten feet above the pavement at the gate, and hit the ground with her boots with enough force to make a sound, which she amplified. “What’s this all about,” she said.

“We want to know if you’re training the Air Force for combat,” one of them said.

“I have no authorization to talk about military matters or contracts. You’ll have to talk to General Stuart,” she said.

“Well, then, are you supplying people to go into combat?”

“You saw what we can do this morning. Kids and Envoys. Envoys can’t fight. And I’ll be darned if I’ll send kids into a war zone,” she replied. “Now, you really must excuse me. I have guests to see to. You people. You really MUST get out of the habit of blowing things up way out of proportion based on rumor or misplaced logic.” She shook her head, slowly, as if in disbelief of their questions. Then turned and took off straight up, leveled out and flew back to the field.

Ted met her, and told her that Stuart had taken his troops back to the base. “He said that his head was ringing with all the possibilities of what he just saw. It was one thing to see the kids perform like that,” he said. “But to see his own troops engage in that, and enjoy what was obviously hard work, was astounding. They had barely managed close order drill in the air. And you had them doing aerobatics. Then the fur-balls, and the plays your team executed. He’s got air games coming up in a week, and he’s going to put some drones in the air, and some trash vehicles on the ground to show what they can do. I think I’d like to go see that. And the reaction of those he’s out to impress.”

“So would I,” Muriel said. “Maybe even take my friends. They need to get out more.”

“So, how’d it go with the media?”

“Oh, I threw them a curve,” she said, and explained what she’d told Stuart. “Now they think that Stuart was here to try to get contracts for combat troops,” she added and chuckled. “And they got a fly in their ear about jumping to conclusions.”

“Nicely done. By the way, where’d you ever learn to do an Immelmann?”

“Oh,” Muriel said, offhand, “one of the troops was an amateur pilot, and had flown in formations. Civil Air Patrol, I think. When I went into what Don calls the ‘hive mind’, I had all that on access. That was the reason I set them to take off in formation like that. Just trying for a little flash and dazzle. You know, ‘if you can’t dazzle them with brilliance, baffle them with’”

“Uh, huh. Don’t say it. Your mother has long ears.”

“Long hands, too,” Muriel said, motioning to the bar of soap that had just appeared in front of her, laughing. “I think I’m just as happy that she didn’t get the training until AFTER I was out from under her thumb.” She sent the soap back.

“Seriously, were you controlling the troops?” Ted asked.

“Nope. Oh, I was aware of them and where they were, and what they were doing. Sometimes I’d make suggestions. But mostly it was a way to keep out of each others way and coordinate what we were doing. Like my popping up. The whole reason was to keep the other team distracted, and it did. One of mine got the ball and sent it toward the goal. He sent the idea of chasing it and defending it. And I added the weaving in front of it to distract the goalie,” Muriel said. “That’s what makes that hive mind great, is that you’re coordinated with your team mates, and everybody knows what’s going on.”

I’m going to have to try that, sometime,” Ted said. “Maybe you can have your friends teach me the game.”

“Just ask them,” Muriel said. “They’re human. And, for the most part, they no longer think you eat babies for breakfast,” she added with a grin. “And they’d be thrilled to help you and train you in something. Half of them believe you know everything. The other half are sure that you’re faking it.”

“I don’t know. I should try to keep up my image.”

“Which image is that?” Muriel asked, and Ted KNEW he was in for it. “The image of being a know-it-all? Or the image of faking it?” She quick translated to her office before he could try to hit her, laughing all the way. Mata just looked at her and shook her head.

Chapter 23

Straw Boss (Monday morning)

"Muriel," Ted said, "I know you don't have any business knowledge or experience, but can I ask you to represent us at these two? The Envoys are in charge, and they'll help you. You really don't have to do anything more than show up and tour the place with them. You don't have to say anything or make any business decisions."

"OK. Problems?"

"No, not really, just not enough time to do everything. Oh, make a record for me of them, would you, please? And take a squad with you."

"No sweat. Class A's with the boots," she said.

"And the hat," Mata said. "It'll go well with the uniform, and make you look more mature. The other three squads will be with you, too. Just not in evidence unless you need them."

"OK, mother," Muriel said, and snickered.

"Yea, I know. I'm beginning to sound like one. And I shouldn't. But I'm worried that whoever it is may try something. And they'd strike at who they thought was the weakest."

"You're right, Mata. I'm sorry. I must drive you crazy, sometimes."

"No," Mata replied. "I was already that to have taken on being your protector." They traded sticking out their tongues at each other, and laughing.

"OK, then, let me gather up my squad and I'll be on my way."

Five minutes later she left, with her squad, for the first of the companies headquarters. Good visuals gave her a view of the hall in front of the entrance to the office of the president of the company. A ding of a bell and six people translated in. As she opened the door a secretary tried to brush past her and bounced off her shield, causing her to drop papers all over the floor.

An Envoy immediately went to the woman and helped her up. Another gathered up the papers and handed them to Muriel. "Where were you going with these?" Muriel asked.

"Oh, just down to the shredder. These are old, out of date," the woman said.

"Uh, huh," Muriel murmured.

::Lock it down. Stop all work and save the computers and papers,:: Muriel sent to every Envoy in the building.

“That's why this is dated for Friday, right? And Friday is out of date. I think we need to have a talk,” Muriel told her.

::Ted, with the other companies, stop everything. I caught a secretary trying to destroy papers. Aside from the fact that they might show some of the shady things the companies have been up to, they might also give us a further lead,:: she sent.

“Where's the Envoy that's supposed to be here?” Muriel asked.

“Oh, him. He went to talk to the programmers. He should be back, soon.” Muriel got a visual of an off-site place, not far away. The Envoy there assured Muriel that he'd heard, and all the computers were shut down and the programmers were being held there. He'd recruited other Envoys to help when he heard her call.

::Muriel? What's happening? Why the lock down?:: Ted sent.

::You said that there wouldn't be any problems, here. But there are. The staff was in early, and had managed to send the Envoy that was supposed to be the new manager off-site to the programmers to solve some problem. Then they started destroying paperwork. I'm looking at an email that was printed off that's considered old. It's dated Friday. This place is locked down, and I'm sending people home, but I'm checking them for stuff on their cell phones and personal laptops before they leave. I suggest you do the same. Would you contact the Envoy that's in charge of the other company I'm supposed to see and have him do the same, please::

::Don't send them home,:: Ted shot back. ::Keep them there until they can all be questioned. I'm flooding the companies with Envoys, now. Nobody will go unwatched::

True to his word, other Envoys appeared next to all the office workers. The flurry of activity that had been manifest suddenly stopped. A man came out of the office that Muriel was supposed to occupy as the new head of the company.

“What's going on here? Who are all these people and why have they stopped my staff from working? Who are you?” he asked.

“Your boss,” Muriel said. “My name is Muriel. Ambassador Muriel, to you. And I'll see you in my office. Now,” she added, and walked past him to the office of the company president. Two of Muriel's Envoys 'assisted' the man to follow her.

“You've been busy, I see. Files open, papers disturbed, how much is missing?” Muriel asked.

“I don't have to tell you anything. You're not my boss. You're just some kid. Now get

out of here before I have you arrested for trespass.”

Muriel cleared enough space on the front of the desk for her to sit. Then looked around at her security squad. “Look like children, don't they? But two of them managed to get you back in here with no trouble at all. Now . . . we can do this the easy way, or the hard way. I'm going to ask you some questions, and you are going to answer. And you're going to tell the truth. I'll know if you lie to me. And if you lie to me you won't like the results. You'll end up with the worst headache you've ever experienced, because I'll have to go in and find out what I want to know the easy way. I'm trying to save you that, which is why I'm offering you the opportunity to do things the hard way. Just talk to me and answer my questions.”

“I don't have to tell you anything. And you can't make me, despite your brave words, little girl. You really shouldn't antagonize your betters, you know. All you'll get for it is jailed and your parents disgraced. Security should be here, momentarily, and they'll hold you until the police arrive.”

“Uh, huh. Look, Mr. Green, you aren't even supposed to be here. You were fired Friday. Your staff was told not to come in until nine o'clock, yet here they are, and it isn't even eight yet. Now, like it or not, I'm the boss here, now. And you will tell me what you were up to, I mean besides trying to destroy evidence of what this company was actually doing. Just pretend that you're in court, on the stand, and have sworn to tell the truth. You can do that. Otherwise, you could actually end up there for real, explaining to the judge and jury what you were actually doing trespassing on property owned by Enclave. Oh, and as for the police, the signal never went out to security. When the police come it'll be at my request.”

“You're not the boss, here. You know nothing about this company or how it's run. I'm the only one that knows. And I'll be damned if I tell a little girl that's playing boss. Your games don't mean anything to me. Touch me and you and your parents will be destroyed.”

“Uh, huh. The easy way it is, then.” Muriel looked thoughtful for a moment as she made the link to her squad and the Envoys in the outer office, who continued linking to all the rest of the Envoys. “Better help him to a seat. This is going to take a while.”

As Mr. Green was being 'helped' to a chair, another Envoy appeared. “Sorry, Muriel. I got sent on a wild goose chase. But perhaps for the best. The programmers and their computers are secured. What can I do to help?”

“Just make a record of everything I pass you. Mr. Green is about to be very helpful. I tried to be nice, but he decided to be a bully instead, even threatening me and my parents. That's not nice. So, now he's going to tell me everything, and he isn't going to want to do it, which means he's going to have a headache to end all headaches.” Muriel got off the desk and walked over to where the Envoys were holding him.

One hand resting gently on the man's shoulder, she started feeding information to the Envoy manager as well as to the web of Envoys throughout the company. Envoys scrambled to find the bits and pieces of information that supported all that Muriel dug out of the man's mind. Even material that had been shredded was pieced back together and examined.

Finally, they had it all. Muriel checked the man's vitals and ensured that he didn't have any method of suiciding, then disengaged.

::Muriel? Are you all right? You just seemed to drop out for a half hour.::

::I'm all right, Ted. I just had to go in and get the information out of the man's mind. The Envoy manager here has the record, and the paperwork backup is coming. The Envoys even managed to paste shredded documents back together to find what was needed to support the record. Just as a suggestion, though, don't do that on a full stomach. I thought I'd met some bad people, but this man's mind was just plain foul. Like walking through a sewer. You've got the rest of the companies locked down and flooded with Envoys?::

::Yes, why?::

::Because I may need to do the same thing with each of them. Remember that 'hive mind' I told you about? That's how we got all this in only a half hour. As I came across a bit of information I threw it to the mind, and the Envoys did the rest. You haven't learned how to do it, yet. It'll have to be me. But when we get back to Enclave I'm sitting you down and teaching you how to do it. Who's the police in this town?::

::Don't bother going through them. Call out Henry Richards and Adam Frank. This is a treaty violation, since, as of Friday afternoon, the company was made the property of Enclave and the Envoys. Turn the goon over to them for criminal trespass, as well as any others that can't accept the new order of things. I've called in Don, and he'll teach me the 'hive mind' thing. I'll do the rest of them, myself. And I'm sorry you had to do that.::

::Don't worry about it. It had to be done. I think it would be best to just shut the company down for a week or so until we can determine who will work for us and can the rest, though. I'll turn him over to the FBI, and let them check the rest of the employees. Oh, and Ted, I wasn't kidding about not doing it on a full stomach. Some of this was bad. The manager you put in place took the raw data and made a record. Now, he's shaking. It's that bad. Don't let Don do it.::

::Tell him I'll have a relief there for him in the next few minutes. You get Henry in there to take charge, then get back to Enclave. I promise that I'll keep Don out of it.::

"Your relief is coming," Muriel told the Envoy manager. "I'm sorry you had to go through that. If I'd known, I'd have pulled in one of my squad to do it. They're aware of just how bad some humans can be. Why don't you sit down for a while and just relax. You did fine. Thank you for your help."

"Ma'am, I thought I'd seen a lot, working for Caleb. But nothing like that. I think when he gets Home he'll destroy himself from his judgment. I've seen that happen, but was never directly involved in it." He shuddered. "How can people stand to live with themselves like that?"

"I don't know. I just know that they do," Muriel said, then called Henry and asked him

for his expert help.

Caleb entered the office about then, acknowledged Muriel with a sad smile, then went to the Envoy manager, knelt beside him and took his hand. Somehow, Muriel could feel that Caleb was settling the Envoy down, calming him, and helping him to deal with what he'd seen.

Other Envoys came in and started working on the office. Others were putting papers into boxes for transport back to Enclave for examination. Muriel gave Green a small shot of power to ease the headache, some. Not cure it, but just make it barely bearable. Henry walked in, looked around, then went to Muriel.

"You look like hell, girl. What have you been doing?"

"Just walking through a sewer. Mr. Green is the former general manager of the company. He was fired Friday when Enclave took over the company. He was back here this morning trying to destroy company records of illicit dealings. So, criminal trespass, attempted destruction of private property. I don't know what all else, yet. We'll have to go through the records and see what we find. But obviously there was something he wanted to hide. Some of the records were shredded. The Envoys managed to recover them. We'll take them back to a secure area and see what we can get out of them. There's five other companies that we've currently got under lock-down, that may need the same sort of treatment. Ted can tell you about those."

"OK. Will we need any of this paperwork to hang the charges on Mr. Green?" Henry asked.

"Not for the trespass. Talk to the office staff, I think you can get verification that they were ordered to pull certain records and destroy them, and that Mr. Green was the one that gave the order. That should cover you. As soon as we can scan even the shredded documents we'll send the originals to you. I doubt if fingerprints would help at all, but we'll be careful with them."

"I take it that you're looking for something else?" Henry asked.

"You could say so. Aside from getting our people up to speed on the company, itself, and what it is supposed to be doing, we're looking for the hidden boss of this and the other five companies. There's some dirty stuff in those records, if I don't miss my guess. You may be kept busy. I know we will."

"Muriel, I've got to ask. You haven't done anything illegal, have you?"

"Henry, the charges will stand on their own. I discovered this man in the president's office, illegally, since he isn't supposed to be on the property any more, trying to pretend that he was still in charge. As I came in I bumped into a secretary that was hurrying out to have more records destroyed. She's currently under guard at the front of the office. Anything else I might have done has no bearing on your case, and couldn't be proven in any case," Muriel

said. "Will that satisfy you?"

"I guess it'll have to," Henry replied.

"We have two objectives, here, Henry. The first is to get the company up and running profitably. The second, and perhaps more important, is to find out who is behind these six companies and what they've been up to. When we find out more, we hope to have evidence to hand you. NOT manufactured evidence, either. But in the mean time, this is Enclave property. He's not supposed to be here, since he was fired Friday afternoon and forbidden access. He called in office staff and programmers – they're at another site – and they were engaged in destroying company records. Evidence, possibly. That's what we have to find out. Some of it may be sensitive information that only involves the company and its products. Some of it may be evidence in further culpability of those here or those further up the chain. That's the evidence we'll happily turn over to you. NONE of these people were supposed to be here until nine o'clock, and then only under supervision. Someone let them in without authorization. Does that help?"

"What was the purpose of bringing them in?" asked Henry.

"To let them know that they wouldn't be financially short because of the shut-down. They would have all gone home with checks for two weeks wages or salary, as well as information on health care and other things in the package. Essentially, they'd have been re-hired by us. But until nine o'clock, they were essentially unemployed. It still isn't nine o'clock, but they're here, anyway. That makes them trespassers. How much further it goes, I don't know. Maybe you can find out. Those that were forced to come in you can treat as victims. But the rest should be jailed until we know just how much they were part of the conspiracy."

"OK, we can do that on what you've told me. Does Ted have the paperwork to show that Enclave owns the property?" Henry asked.

"He should. It was all signed Friday afternoon. Ask him. He's only a thought away. Or come by our lawyers' offices. I'm sure they have copies."

"OK, thanks. I'll do that. And Muriel," he said, "I'm sorry I had to put you through this."

"Henry, it's your job. I know that. I'm just a bit shaken by what I've found out so far. Henry, this company was dirty. When it re-opens it won't be. THAT'S what we've got to be sure of. This company, and the other five, will be representing Enclave and the whole Envoy attitudes. If it seems like I'm holding something back, well, it has nothing to do with the charges as they are. But it isn't fully formed enough to provide you with evidence of wrong-doing in other areas. That's what we've got to find out and stop. When we know more, so will you."

"Fair enough. Then, why don't you get going. Are you leaving the Envoys here?"

"Yes, until we've pulled in all the information and all the ex-employees are out. Then

we'll just have an Envoy security force on hand to make sure that it stays closed until we re-open it. Will they be in your way?"

"No. Not really. I'll see you back at your office once we're done here. And I'll get the list of the other companies from Ted, and have him go through them with me. Your part is done."

"Thanks, Henry. Sorry about calling you out like this, but . . . thanks."

"You're welcome, Muriel. Why don't you go back to Enclave, now, and let us finish up?"

"No," she replied. "No, not yet. When the evidence is gathered up and you are finished with your investigations, and this office is straightened up, there will still be things I need to do, here. I need to understand what the product was. I need to see about employees, even if all I use are Envoys to get it started again. We have paid a terrible price for this company . . . and the other five. That needs to be paid back as quickly as possible. And the companies need to be protected. From what I've seen in these papers, large sums of money were going somewhere, and I mean to know where, and recover them. I'm sure the same was true of the others. No, Henry, I need to stay here for now and at least get a start on it."

Chapter 24

Change You Can Do Something With (Monday afternoon)

::Mata, can you send someone with something for me for lunch?::

::Chuck will be there in a couple of minutes. When are you coming back?::

::When I figure out how to make this company work right. You wouldn't believe how bad it is. They make software that is supposed to be the be-all and end-all for offices, and it's so full of bugs and hidden 'gotchas' that it's ridiculous. I can't see how they even sold one copy.::

::Did you get the dump for managers?:: Mata asked.

::Yep. And it helped. But it's so brief that it opened up in fifteen minutes.::

::You WILL come back, tonight, for supper or I'll come get you and drag you out.::

::Yes.:: Muriel replied.

::Yes, what, young lady. You WILL come back and eat and sleep.::

::Yes. OK, I'll do that. I DO understand what you're doing. And I agree. I won't be any good going without food and sleep.::

::That's better, young lady.::

::Mata, I know you care, even if you try to hide it by being gruff. But Mata, if you really care – if you really want to help, help me figure out how to save this company and make it productive and profitable.::

::OK, I'll think about it. Lunch is coming.:: Ted appeared, then, carrying a tray.

“Becoming a waiter?”

“Well, it's better than becoming a waitress. I don't have the legs for it.” This brought a smile to Muriel's face. “That's better. Now, why are you holing yourself up here?”

“This company. It shouldn't be making money, but it is. The software is the worst I've ever heard of, it follows no standards – in fact it tries hard to BREAK standards, it's full of bugs, and nobody else can successfully write to its formats. Why are people using it?”

“Oh. I thought you knew. Lock-in. The company made deals with manufacturers of

computers to put only their product on computers. Especially those for businesses. That resulted in the businesses being locked in to using that format. Then they came up with updates every year or so, and phased out the older product or even actively killed it. So businesses are helpless and so are many home users, because they only know that particular version of the software, and it's the one that businesses demand that one uses for any submission. Like resumes and other documents. If the business only accepts the format offered by that one manufacturer, then the general public is forced to buy it at exorbitant prices, despite the fact that, even with research and development costs factored in, it only costs about ten percent of the retail price to make."

"Oh, so if we change it to use standards, and allow other software manufacturers to write to this format, and eliminate the manufacturer lock-in, it would collapse?" asked Muriel.

"Not necessarily. If we kept it backward compatible – in other words so it could read the older version of the formats – then it's possible that people would keep buying it. You're not eating," Ted added.

"OK," Muriel said around a mouthful of tuna sandwich, "then we're going to make some drastic changes and start making this brand honorable. We need programmers that can create honest code, and can allow the previous versions to be imported and converted automatically. We need office staff, I'll have to find out what they all do, and we'll need packaging. Are we allowed to use the Home logo on it to show that it's changed management?"

"No, to the last. However, there's nothing stopping you from using the Enclave logo. The rest is fairly simple, and the Envoys should be able to either find people or fill the positions, themselves, for the most part. There are other quirks, too. Like all the litigation they've been generating and spending money on," Ted said.

"I didn't know there was an Enclave logo."

"Yep. Sure is. Just as soon as you come up with it." He grinned evilly at her.

"You goof!"

"I'm not kidding. I came up with the Home logo. You come up with the Enclave logo, and you have the right to paste it on anything you feel is worth it – anything that follows the examples or philosophy of Enclave."

"Hmm," she thought for a second, then said, "OK, I'll do it. Is there anything that I've missed?"

"Lots. But for a first day, and a first attempt to get a grasp on things, especially, I'd say you did very well," Ted said. "I take it you want to do the same things with the rest of the companies?"

"Yes. If it's at all possible," she replied.

“OK, then I'm going to take some of the work off your hands. You are now Envoy Enclave Enterprises, the controlling factor of all the companies. We'll get Envoys to come in and take over what you were trying to do, following your ideas, and monitoring to be sure that no outsider manages to get control in any way. The companies are yours, young lady. You're now a boss.”

Muriel didn't dignify that with a reply. She just stuck out her tongue. That set them both to laughing.

“I'm going to need a bigger office,” she said.

“Yes, but not as part of your Ambassador's office. I've been thinking”

“Oh, oh. Now we're all in trouble. Where's the fire extinguisher?”

“Be serious. There's nothing to speak of across the street. That's another warehouse that's going to waste. And no, I won't move the companies into Enclave. There's a reason for that, but I won't get into it now. Anyway, that warehouse across the street is going to be a combination of things. Part of it will be your Holding Company. That's what a controlling company is called, by the way. Part of it is going to be a lunch room. The one where you got your first stripes is basically for visitors that want a quick lunch. This one will be for Envoys and your employees, and for the same reason – a quick lunch. The Holding Company will pretty much run itself, with your occasional oversight. That solves the problem of you wearing another hat. It also keeps you free to be an Ambassador, which I think you like.”

“It sounds like you're trying to take the company away from me,” Muriel said.

“Nope. I'm just trying to take the grunt work away from you. First, you aren't really qualified to do it. Second, you have more important things to do. Once the companies are set up, and yes, I'm giving you all of them, they'll pretty much run themselves with oversight from the Envoy Enclave Enterprises, which will run itself with oversight from you both directly and indirectly through your Envoy managers. You'll be the director of their focus, the ground of the philosophy of their attitude, and the protector of their operations. And those are things that you ARE suited for,” Ted said, gently. “Do it the same way you do your security squads. You give them the format of what you need done, then let them do it, making changes as they need to to suit the circumstances. And you oversee to make sure they still meet your philosophy.”

“OH! OK, I guess that will work. At least it's worth a try. And if a company manager has a problem in an area, I can step in and deal with it in a broad way. Yea. I see what you mean. I was getting tangled up in details that others are better at handling.”

“Now you've got it!” Ted said. “So, are you ready to go back to Enclave and do what you do best?”

“Yea, I guess I'd better, before Mata takes it into her head to come get me and drag me

out like a naughty child,” Muriel said, with relief and renewed energy.

When they stepped into the outer office to let Henry know that they were leaving they noticed that the number of humans left in there was significantly less. Envoys were in abundance, at every workstation and popping in and out, gathering up materials. Henry assured them that most of the people were simply employees, with no connection to whatever had happened in the company. The only reason they were there was fear that they'd lose their jobs if they weren't. They didn't realize that the old manager had been fired. The ones that did know were being detained for questioning at the FBI offices, and the rest that were here were still undergoing the basic questioning.

Muriel found that the Envoy manager had stayed to talk to her, and she put up with about one minute of his apologizing for being duped, then she cut him off. It wasn't his fault that he'd been duped. It had been a carefully orchestrated plan. Just, the next time something like that came up, he should contact her or the yet to be formed holding company for instructions. Other than that, he was free to use his judgment in running the place within the guidelines that she'd set down as soon as she could do so.

Then Muriel and Ted translated back to her office, entering through the whoosh doors, as the office itself seemed to be crowded. Mata met them, with some relief on her face to see Muriel looking chipper, and outlined what they'd found out so far. Unfortunately, it wasn't much. Emails went to a 'blind' address, an address who's owner was essentially anonymous. Financials did the same thing, using multiple 'off shore' banks to hide the person or organization who would eventually get the money. Letters were to and from legal firms that would not disclose their clients.

The best possibilities ended up being from the 'look of the thing' – all the top stock sales and purchases went through what were termed as banks, some of them being actual banks and some as hedge funds and the like. Often, high ranking officers of the banks were also on the board or otherwise involved in the hedge funds. Other financial gray areas existed, too, that would have to be looked into. Fred and his crew were looking into all of the vague area for clues.

Ted called Bart in, and they discussed setting up the warehouse across the street as the Envoy Enclave Enterprises office and a lunch room. Bart thought for a minute, then said it would take about two hours. Maybe more, depending on how fancy it needed to be. Ted looked at Muriel.

“Don't look at me! I've never set up a business before. The only thing I can say for sure is that I wouldn't have to have an office over there. Conference room, yes, in case I need to meet with people. But I couldn't even pretend to know how large it should be.”

“Well, would there be people coming in? Or would all that be handled at the company level?” Bart asked.

“From what I gathered from Ted, it would all be handled at company level. If I had to meet with company managers, for example, there's no reason why they couldn't meet with me

here, in my office,” Muriel replied.

“OK, Envoys can work in a bedlam situation. Your office is the proof of that,,” he said, grinning. “But if you're going to have human employees then you need to give them some space they can call their own, and a certain degree of privacy. Also restrooms.”

“Granted. And I think that, eventually, most of the people would be employees. Trained to the positions by Envoys, yes. But we should keep this as human as possible. I know that we can't do that with the companies, themselves. They'll have to be headed by Envoys to keep the possibility of corruption at bay,” Muriel said. “And is there a possibility of day care for kids?”

“Good point. A distinct possibility. We'll have to be flexible on that, and see what's needed. Some parents may need pickup for kids at school. Others, particularly mothers, will need infant care and possibly a place for breast feeding. I'll look into that. But that wouldn't be in the office, proper. It would be next door, accessible from inside, but a separate area. You'll need to work out how to account for that in the 'employment package'. But staffing it would be easy. Envoys. Some with good mothering instincts, like Mata,” Bart said.

“I heard that, Bartholomew. And don't think you're going to get away with it. Just wait until I get you home, young man,” Mata shouted back, and everybody broke up laughing. “That's better,” Mata continued, as she walked into Muriel's office. “It's about time people stopped taking themselves so seriously. Muriel, one thing I think we should do, when the office is staffed, is put them to work on this mass of information. There may be nuggets of information we're missing because we're going through it so fast. The only thing that should come back here is information for Fred's analysis group to see. No offense, but this is starting to affect our work, here.”

“None taken.” Muriel said. “I honestly didn't know how big it was when I started. And then I got bogged down in it, myself, and didn't know what to do until Ted showed up with lunch. How about we pull it for now, and let it continue when the office is set up?”

“Well . . . yea, we could do that. There are a couple of things,” Mata said, “that may continue on. Leads that haven't petered out yet. I really don't think they'll go much further, but to drop them and have someone else pick them up just seems a waste.”

“OK, pack up what's been covered, with a cover sheet to say what's been done. Pack up the stuff that hasn't been seen yet and mark it in orange, or something distinctive to tell them apart. Then move them all out of here before somebody trips and breaks someone. You can keep the few that look like they've still got a ways to go or are questionable. Then you can stop trying to act like a business and get back down to business.”

A voice behind Muriel said, “Um . . . Muriel?”

Muriel turned. “Sally! Hi, how's Peter?”

“He's fine. And the word's gotten around. 'Don't mess with him, he's got a sister that

can put you on your butt and keep you there'." She snickered. "That's more humiliating to them than actually beating them up. Look, what I came to ask you is, um, is it all right if I train people?"

"Yea. Though if they're kids you should probably get their parent's permission. Unless it's an extreme situation, that is."

"Um, and am I allowed to put the stripes on them?" Sally asked.

"Uh, huh? Like you think you did something wrong, and now are trying to get permission after the fact. Sally, if you've got trainees that need stripes, bring them here and let me know how far they went, and I'll be happy to teach you how to put their stripes on them. I thought you knew how, though."

"Well, I kinda do, but I never practiced it. Oops. Yea, I trained some, and they need stripes. Then I wondered if I did something wrong, and thought I'd better talk to you," Sally said.

"Bring them. Bring their parents, too. If you've trained them, then you can reach them all, mentally. Give them a visual of the street, out front, and tell them to come in," Muriel said.

Two minutes later, the street was crowded. "Um, Sally? Just how many did you train?"

"Oh, about twenty-five, I think," Sally said, then apologized, "I kinda lost count. They are in my gym class, and I goofed and left my shield out a foot when we were playing dodge ball. The ball hit, and stuck, one foot from me, and, well, the cat was kinda out of the bag. They'd seen you on TV, and what you'd done at that school. And they saw that arms demonstration you were in, and how nothing touched you. And they wanted to know if they could do it. So, we met after school and I pulled the 'knock-knock' on them and, well, it kinda went from there. It took two days to get them all through. And they went all the way through it, including going to Home."

"Did their parents know about it?"

"Well, not at first. I had them tell their parents after I realized that they could be trained. None of them objected," Sally said.

"So, let's do this." Muriel turned to the assembled mob and said, "My name is Muriel. Formally, it's Ambassador Muriel, but I only use that when I'm trying to impress someone. Can I have those of you that passed come up front where I can see you? Good. Thank you. As you know, you've gotten some special training. It can help you, protect you, but it's also a bit dangerous. Not to you, directly, but to others. Now, most of you are probably most interested in the ability to make your own clothes, and change instantly," and she switched from Class A's to utilities to formal wear and back to Class A's. That got some 'yeas' out of the assembled girls.

"I would also imagine that you've also learned that there are pros and cons to having

shields. There are times when they kinda get in the way, like showering. You can pull them back to just under your skin, though. And when you're done with a shower, drying off is simple. Just push the shields out, and you're instantly dry. I don't think I need to give you any further information on that," Muriel continued.

"So, Sally says that you're all eligible for stripes. Anyone with training will be able to see them. So will Envoys, because they ARE the training. But everyday people will only be able to see them if you let them, after today. I say after today, because your parents deserve to see you get them."

"Now," she went on, "I could put them on you myself. But, I think Sally deserves to do that, since she trained you. So, I'm going to teach her how to do it, then monitor to be sure she does it right. She probably told you, we don't believe in failure. Anyone that passes the first test, we find a way to get them to pass the rest. So, give me a minute to get with Sally" An intense mental discussion went on between Muriel and Sally. Muriel grinned at her as they disengaged, and Sally faced her friends and classmates.

"OK," Sally said, "Hands up. Think of the gem you like best," and five stripes appeared on the upraised wrists and cuffs.

"And now for the part that Sally can't do. And the reason she can't is because she isn't an Ambassador for Home," Muriel said. "You all know what 'no pockets' are. If you reach into yours, you'll find a little green booklet. Take it out and take a look inside." Twenty-five hands reached in twenty-five different directions and pulled out the Home passports. Some of the girls had tears in their eyes when they saw the certificate of citizenship inside, and the group casually broke up as kids returned to their parents to show them the passports.

"Now, there's no customs check-points either way between Home and here. None are possible because, as you know, Home is only a step away, but not part of earth. So, as passports, they're useless. But they do serve as a reminder of what you've accomplished. Congratulations to all of you."

"And one more thing, before you get too comfortable, we have a couple of things left to teach you. One is a first aid course of sorts. We'll give it to you mentally, and it will unfold over the next couple of days. So don't cut yourselves before then. The second is some additional training that builds on the basics that you've already got. And if you saw TV Saturday, you will have seen some of what I'm talking about. An Air Force general came up with the initial idea, and my friends and I kinda added to it to create a game. You'll get that as a dump, too. But it should open up in a very short time. Just try not to shock your parents too much when you understand what it is." This brought chuckles from the crowd. Muriel delivered the two dumps by creating the 'hive mind' with all of them, then passing the dumps to them all through that.

"Now, you're all welcome to visit Enclave whenever you like. You parents, if you have your daughters along with you, you'll find that any prices here make bargains look like something for rich people. That's because Envoys honor people that have gone through the training, and won't accept any payment from them. Otherwise, you'd be treated like visitors

and not guests. Visitors pay for things. I understand that it's much cheaper here than outside Enclave, but I haven't really checked myself. Ted's kept me kinda busy the past few weeks."

Muriel turned back to Sally, and said, "OK, how was that? Did I do well enough?"

"Oh, you beast. Yes, you did well enough. You put on the Ambassador very well and made it a casually formal gathering. I KNOW the kids enjoyed it, as I was linked into them. And I'm pretty sure the parents are impressed. A real, live Ambassador and leader of a nation came out and talked with them like she was a real person."

"Ouch," Muriel said. "Well, I suppose I deserved that," and grinned. "I just wanted them to feel that they were getting personal service."

"Oh, they got that. And it looks like some of the parents would like to talk to you, themselves," Sally said.

Chapter 25

Personal Service

(Monday evening and Tuesday Morning)

Muriel spent the rest of the afternoon meeting with parents of Sally's classmates. Oh, the kids were there, too, but it was the parents that had the questions. Most notably, would having the training mean that their daughter would have to wear a uniform, and how dangerous was it for their daughter to have gotten the training. Both of those questions were easy to answer, as Sally definitely wasn't in a uniform, and wasn't being placed in dangerous situations beyond that of any teenage child. And she was better protected than other teenage children.

Some of the parents and kids left soon after that, due to other engagements. But many stayed to see Enclave and get to know more about Envoys. Those that stayed had dinner at various restaurants, and were treated like visiting royalty. The stripes made the difference, of course. And the Envoys were gentle with assuring parents that, because the kids had taken the training and passed it, they and anyone they brought would always be treated this way. This was their home away from Home, in a sense.

Some few parents asked about the first aid course that Muriel had given the kids. Muriel explained that it was something that only someone with the training could use, as it involved Envoy techniques. The course went far beyond that found in a Red Cross course, and used entirely different methods – the Red Cross wouldn't approve it, for example. But in an emergency their daughter would be able to help save lives and get people to safety without endangering herself. No one asked about the flying package, and Muriel found that rather curious, until she realized that the parents, and maybe even the kids, didn't realize how big a thing that could be. They thought it was just a game.

When Muriel finally had a chance to have her own dinner, she reflected that there had been a lot of changes over the past week or so. Changes in how things were done, as well as changes to her status. But all of them were things that she could do things with. They weren't arbitrary changes, but rather changes due to development and circumstances. And she was glad that Sally had shown up with her classmates, as it re-grounded her to her basic task: being a trainer.

She was lounging on a lounge chair by the pool on her back deck when Ted asked if he could come over. "So, how are you feeling now?" he asked.

"Better," she said. "Not so overwhelmed. Having Sally show up with trainees helped re-ground me."

"Ah! I wondered what that was all about. So Sally's training."

"Yea, and by accident. Gym class dodge ball, and one stuck a foot away from her."

And her classmates knew what that meant. So they all asked for training, and she did it. Then she realized that maybe she shouldn't have before asking my permission, and came here all apologetic. So I had her bring in the kids and their parents, and taught her to put stripes on them. However, I was the one that gave out the passports."

"Good. Well done. Any problems with the parents?" Ted asked.

"Not to speak of. Questions and concerns, yes, but easily handled," she replied.

"OK, well, about tomorrow," Ted said, changing the subject, "Bart's got your business office up and running, and the congestion is out of your Ambassador office. A lot of what we got from that only takes us one step further. The general manager you turned over to Henry couldn't really tell us much. He got orders, he did what he was told, he got bonuses. We checked his financials, and again hit the blind spots. The orders were emails that were done the same way: blind."

"That means," he went on, "that the only way we'll catch them is when they approach us. You notice I said when. I really expect that it will be in the next day or two. Whatever you do, don't talk to them. Refer them to me. It's MY turn to chew somebody up, and I'm hungry," he said with a grin. "I also expect that it will only be intermediaries that approach you, at first. That's why I want you to pass them to me. Eventually, they're either going to have to talk to us, personally, or see all that revenue go away. Well, it will anyway, but they don't know that."

"We're still looking into the banking industry and the non-banking financial institutions as being the driving force behind Wall Street. And we actually may have a clue, there. I've got my analysis team going over all the transactions for the past year, so it may take some time to sort out. But between the named connections and the various manipulations that are obvious even to me, we may get closer. That may be the next target I hit," he said.

"In the mean time, what does it mean for you. Well, first, come up with that logo. It's a good idea, and we can carry that over to all the companies. Second, you've got an unspoken philosophy. I want you to try to put that down on paper, and look at it from different directions – protection wise, business wise, and anything else wise that you can think of. Try to find the holes, try to find where you can improve it, things like that. No, this isn't for a test, except by yourself, and there's no time limit. But it WILL help you to figure out the directions you want these companies to go in, and what image you want them to present to the world."

"Your staff," he said, going on, "will be Envoys to begin with. There hasn't been time to find and interview people knowledgeable in Business to get them working. That will come, and you will be a part of the interview process. In the mean time, the Envoys will get things organized and running. You don't have to do anything there except try to find out what directions they think would work best. You'll learn things about business on the way, but don't let that cripple you. You're the five star general that looks at the broad picture, not the private down on the line that has to make it work. It's up to those working for you to figure out that part of it."

"You're telling me not to micro-manage," Muriel said.

"Yes, I am. Not that I think you will intentionally. But it's something to think about. I know it's one of the hardest things for me to do is stand back and let people do their job. Either they can do it without my standing over their shoulder, or they aren't the right people for the job. And if they aren't the right people, then we need to find new people. In a sense, that's what we're doing with all the companies, all the way down to the ones that work on assembly lines and mail rooms, or whatever. We're replacing everyone with Envoys, then filling the positions with people we can trust to do the job our way."

"Some of the people that will be coming to you shouldn't be coming to you. They'll be people that are owed money by the previous management. Send them to your staff, and it'll be taken care of. They'll ask for the contracts, and check them against our records. The reason I say this is because our nemesis may try to sneak in payments that way. If we have a contract with a person or company, we'll be able to verify it that way, as well as the last time they were paid, and how much is outstanding. Envoys can't be fooled that way. We poor humans can. Let them buffer you on that. OK?"

"Definitely OK. In a sense you're putting me in as a straw boss, a name that people recognize but with no real power. Except that I do have power but not in the way they think I do. Yea, I can live with that, as long as I can holler for you if I feel uncomfortable with something," Muriel said.

"Exactly. And feel free to holler. I'm the one that got writer's cramp from signing all the papers, so I'm the only one, supposedly, that can make any changes in them. That was the real reason I tossed you at that company, was to keep you out of the way while I did the dirty deed. I didn't realize what you'd be getting yourself in for, but you handled it just right, up until you got yourself bogged down in trying to find the source alone. It's too big for one person, really."

"Yea," she said. "I see that now. Sorry, I'll try to remember that and pull back before I get bogged down again."

"Nothing to be sorry about. What you did was good. You just didn't have the experience to be able to realize when it happened. And I apologize if I was rough on you, pulling you back. I didn't mean to be."

"No, you weren't rough on me. It was just hard letting go. You know? I just realized something. It was the same in school when I couldn't understand something. I'd keep digging hoping I'd find AN answer, even if it wasn't THE answer. After that first dump of three years worth of education and the way it was organized, the connections were made, and I realized what I'd missed. And now I realize what we're missing here. Follow the money."

"That," said Ted, "is exactly what we've been trying to do."

"You're overlooking one important area. I'd bet you are. Why will adults talk around kids when they wouldn't talk around other adults? Because they don't see the kids. Why will people talk around waiters and waitresses about sensitive things? Because they're just

furniture. We need to look for something we're not seeing because it's so common, so 'not part of the expected way of doing things' that it's ignored," Muriel said in a bit of agitation.

"You have something in mind, don't you?"

"Yep. Come on. I think I know where to look for it." She got up and went to her great room and turned on the TV.

Her TV was linked to her computer in such a way that she could call up information from her office, below. Her last report from Fred's group had a spreadsheet that showed all sorts of information. She selected the column headed 'Lawyers' and sorted on that. It showed that there were three firms that handled the bulk of the work, and that it was only one or two lawyers in each of the firms that did the actual work.

She tried a different search routine, and the whole thing fell into place. One firm handled anything to do with contracts. One handled nothing but litigation against others. One handled nothing but litigation FROM others against them.

"Do we have anything on the structures of the other five companies?" she asked.

"I don't know. Let me ask," Ted replied, then went unfocused, the way he did when talking mentally to someone. "OK, yes," he finally said. "And Bart says that they used the same format spreadsheet that Fred had started. Can you call up a different window?"

"You bet I can!" and did so. Ted told her how to link to his computer and call up the file, and shortly they had the whole story. The three firms were involved in the same functions in all of the companies. "That's it," he whispered. "That's where we were wrong." Both of them sent information back down to Mata and Bart, telling them to try a different approach.

Suddenly, Fred was in her great room. "You found something? What? That? But why would that be important? Oh. Because those three firms are handling all the large financial situations, and they would be tied back to the source, or closer to it. OK, I'll go looking." And he was gone in one breathless moment.

"I thought you didn't let anyone up here without an invitation," Ted said.

"He asked what was going on, and I OK'd it."

"Oh. OK. For a moment there I was wondering about your shields."

"Relax, Ted. I don't have a secret lover or something. Fred had been talking with Mata when I interrupted. He asked, honest. Sheesh, you're as bad as my mother for jumping to conclusions. SHE thought that something was going on between us because you moved your office to beside mine. Sigmund Freud is supposed to have said, 'Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar'. In other words, you can go crazy trying to link up every little thing when, in fact, no link exists. Actually, I was worried about that with this. Are we selecting an outcome and trying to prove it with their information? My gut says no. But my brain still questions."

"So, now we'll find out whether it's your brain or your gut that you actually think with," Ted said.

"Why, Ted! You should know by now that I'm only a kid. I'm incapable of thinking, and simply go off in all directions at once," she said, and made a goofy face.

"Actually, I think your brain is asking questions simply in an attempt to catch up with your gut. You make intuitive decisions, then have to justify them logically in order to explain them to dumb males," he said.

"Maybe that's it. If nothing else, it's given us another approach," she said. "Enough. I need sleep. You need whatever it is you use as a substitute for sleep. And our Envoys need a break away from us for their own sanity. Not to be pushy, but I'll see you in the morning." Ted grinned and left.

The next morning found them no closer to an answer, but not for lack of trying. They were currently following threads that, if the FBI, CIA, NSA and any other alphabet group knew about would have placed both Ambassadors in prison for life. But then, those alphabet groups didn't have the methods of Home, and were constricted by laws partially created by the very people that didn't want to be noticed. Muriel had started across the street to see her new business office when she was stopped.

"Girl!" a voice said, followed by a male body walking toward her, "I'm looking for Ambassador Muriel. Would you direct me, please?"

"What's this all about?" asked Muriel.

"That's for me to discuss with the Ambassador. All you have to do is direct me," the man said. Suddenly, twenty Envoys surrounded the man, and Mata was standing at Muriel's side.

"Now, let's start from the beginning," Muriel said, softly. Her voice began to take on that almost purr that a large cat makes when it's hunting. "I want to know who you are, what organization you're with, and who you are representing. And I want to know it now."

"What? What is all this. This is none of your business. It's strictly between the Ambassador and myself," the man said.

"Well, if you're looking for an Ambassador," Ted said from the other side of her, "perhaps I will do, instead. In fact, I insist. You see, the last person that demanded to see Muriel tried to kill her. And we wouldn't want anything like that to happen again. So I'm sure that you'll understand that ANYONE asking for her is going to be summarily questioned, at length, before he even gets close to her. You're coming with me." There was a small yelp as the man felt shields grab him, then he and Ted disappeared.

"If you don't need us any longer, yer highness, we'll just be off now," Mata said with an

impish grin and a bad British accent.

“Not at all, my good woman. Just a minor spot of trouble. I'm SURE I could have handled it, myself,” Muriel quipped back, in just as bad a British accent as Mata's, but pompous. “Seriously, Mata, thank you. If I'd done something it would have given it away. As it is, he probably still doesn't realize that he addressed an Ambassador as 'girl'. I know it's what I am. But somehow, in that tone of voice, it really grates on me.”

“It should. It's another form of bullying, and you automatically react to that after your experiences in school,” Mata said. “Want me to go with you?”

“You don't have to. I'm probably keeping you from some important work. But I appreciate it.”

“That does it. I AM coming with you. My first and most important function is protecting you,” Mata said. “NOTHING is more important than that. Besides, I'd forgotten that all the excitement is where-ever you are. You seem to draw it, like a magnet. Don't I get to have ANY FUN?” Mata plaintively asked. Muriel just giggled.

“Well, I guess, if you HAVE to, then I can't stop you,” Muriel replied. They continued the interrupted walk to the offices of the Envoy Enclave Enterprises. The doors were prosaic, pull-to-open doors that let into a wide but thin reception area. Doors on either side led back to the offices, themselves. And in front of Muriel was a one woman bedlam of phones ringing and typical business responses.

“Good morning, Triple E, how can I help you. No, she isn't in, yet.” - - “Good morning, Triple E, how can I help you. Yes, we're the parent corporation to that company. No, she isn't in yet. I really have no idea when she'll be in.” - - “Good morning, Triple E, how can I help you”

“Mata, we need more people in here. She swamped. It probably won't last, but until it dies down we need to take the load off her.”

“On it, Muriel. I saw the same thing. Help is coming.” And in short order four more Envoys were behind the spacious desk, taking phone calls and relieving the poor woman who looked up.

“Oh, Ambassador. I'm sorry, it's been like this since eight o'clock. About half of them are Media, and the rest are divided between lawyers and customers of one company or another needing help. Thanks for the help. What can I do for you?”

“I think it's what I can do for you, and I think we did it. Hang in there. Mata says that it shouldn't last. And I'm Muriel. The title is just to impress the impressionable.”

“Oh, sorry. This is all very . . . well, if this is what it's like to be human, I understand why your lives are so short. WOW, the tension is tremendous.”

Mata said, "Well keep the extras on as long as it lasts, and it'll be available if it ever picks up again. My fault. I should have realized that a new corporation parenting six companies would generate a lot of traffic right off the bat. Take a break if you need to. We just came in to see what it was like over here, and get an idea of what things might be necessary to make things better."

Immediately, a woman came out of the door to Muriel's left, in the wall behind the desk. "Ambassador, I'm Frederica, and I've been put in charge, here. I guess you'd call me the general manager. Oh, thanks for the help. I was just about to ask. Can I show you around?"

"I'd like that, Frederica. I can see why you use your full name. It would be confusing to be talking to a woman named Fred," Muriel said with a grin.

"Actually, it used to be Fred. I switched when I realized where I'd be stationed. I figured that those that didn't know would take me for you, and save you some nonsense."

Muriel's eyebrows went up. "Now, that's very thoughtful of you, and thank you. You mean to say that nobody asked you to switch?"

"Oh, no. It's just when I got here and realized what my job was to be, I realized that I could stand in for you for just normal complaints and problems, and save you from being bothered all the time. It doesn't seem to make any difference to the rest of the Envoys. In fact, they're enjoying themselves digging into the internals of the companies and figuring out what has been done, and what needs to be done. We're passing the information back down to the general managers of the companies, where most of the people are busy trying to learn their new jobs. I must say that it's a bit of a circus, right now, but we're getting things smoothed out."

"Anything I can do to help smooth them?" Muriel asked.

"Not really. Oh, no offense, I didn't mean that to sound like you were incompetent or anything. Just that it's a matter of learning to work together as well as learning the jobs."

"Have you tried using 'hive mind'?"

"Yes. Right now, all it does is add to the confusion. Just too much going on, and it creates a lot of cross-talk chatter. So we're linking as needed. We'll go to 'hive mind' when things get sorted out better, then polish the whole process up that way. Probably this afternoon before we try it again. I know it works. I was in touch with one of your squad leaders, before we came here, and he told me how it worked for them when on the active desks. The general flow of information is improved by about four hundred percent, he said. So we will try."

"I didn't mean it as a complaint," Muriel said. "Nor do I think that you don't know what your doing. On that side, I was just reacting to the little I knew of the problem, and 'hive mind' is still new to me. I'll go with your judgment. And I'd like to hear how it turns out for you. It looks to me like you're thinking on your feet and capable of determining what's needed."

"Thanks. Seriously, I was beginning to wonder."

Muriel grinned, "That's just because it's all coming at you at once. Do what you can, first, then look at the rest and see what else you can do. Sooner or later the problem will disappear, and things will settle into a routine. This madness won't last."

"Oh, good. I was beginning to think that I wasn't cut out for this job," Frederica said.

"If that were true, you wouldn't be here. I think that everyone underestimated what would happen when this started up. Relax. I'll back you. You know more about this than I do, but I'd be happy to help where-ever I can."

"Oh, thank you, Ambassador"

"Just Muriel. The titles are just to impress the guilty," Muriel said, and grinned.

"Your squad leader was right. You are definitely something different to work for. OK, let me show you around," Frederica said, and visibly relaxed.

Chapter 26

Order from Chaos (Tuesday afternoon)

On the other side of the door it was quiet. Six orderly rows stretched toward the back of the room. Each row contained eight cubicles, with aisles between the first two on each side and the four in the middle. The quiet was deceptive, Muriel could detect some serious sound baffling between the cubicles, and the order was that of desperation as Envoys strove to learn their new jobs.

“Do they cross-talk within the company areas?” Muriel asked. “I mean like share information and experience?”

“Yes, to some extent. Even between the companies, some. But right now, they're so deep into trying to understand what the companies did that the cross-talk is minimal. I figure about another hour and I'll call a halt, and have them ask and answer questions between themselves, and see what we come up with. So far, it looks like the companies should have failed a long time ago.”

“Are you getting any input from my on-duty squad, or my analysis team?”

“No, I didn't know we could,” Frederica replied.

“OK, they made some connections that might help you understand. Why don't you halt them and let each company lead ask questions of the squad and analysis. You're at the same point I was, yesterday, when I got pulled off of trying to do it all myself. After I got calmed down from being pulled off and being frustrated, I learned that both of them were way ahead of me in information. They've gone further, since then. New possible connections and reasons that they stayed in existence. That'll settle the frustration I feel in here. Then you can concentrate on what the job needs to be to make the companies successful.”

Frederica did, and in minutes the Envoys began to relax and look normal. The frustration was gone, replaced by some disgust in some cases. Then they started looking at what the jobs really were supposed to be, and how to achieve them. Suddenly, leads were on the phone to the company general managers, outlining plans to solve problems and get things going.

“That did it. The companies were never set up to be good. Just to make money. And the leads have started turning it around. We'll have to wait to see how successful they are, but at least now there's a positive direction that they're going in. Thanks.”

“No problem,” Muriel said. “It was the dirty tricks that were confusing you. I know, because they confused me, before I got with Ted and Mata and found out what had been going on. By the way, we're trying to find out who orchestrated this mess and put them out of

business. So, if you get any phone calls or walk-ins wanting to know where their money is, make them show you a contract, and verify the contract before there's any pay-out. That goes right down to company level. And let Ted or I know who it was that tried to get money that way. We'll bring them in for questioning and see what breaks."

"Will do. Have there been any of those?" Frederica asked.

"Well, one guy tried to kill me, Friday, and somebody tried to contact me this morning before I got here, and wouldn't say what he wanted. I figure Ted's got him in the hot seat right now. We figure that they'll either try legal or financial, next."

"OK, I see what you mean. We'll be on the lookout for them, and alert you should they show up here. But I have a hunch that they'll try to get to you, directly, first," Frederica said.

Muriel agreed, and decided that she'd made enough of an appearance for the time being, and went back to her office. A mental send to Ted confirmed that they were still grilling the intruder, and hadn't even gotten his identification, yet. So Muriel went to her computer and brought up an image processor and started playing with ideas for the logo.

By the time she was ready to break for lunch she had an ideal of what to do, and was simply working on how to implement it. Chuck brought her a Ruben sandwich and chips, and milk, and looked at the screen.

"Something I heard when I went over there gave me the idea," Muriel said. "The receptionist was referring to the Envoy Enclave Enterprises as Triple E. So I thought I'd use three E's as a way of creating the logo."

"OK, you've got your color and Ted's color, and the E from the Home logo. So, liquefy the letters and create that three dimensional effect used in the Home logo. I like the green background, by the way. It sets them off," Chuck said.

Muriel played with it a minute, until Chuck cleared his throat and looked at her tray. "OK, OK, I'll eat. But I think you came up with the idea. Thanks, Chuck."

"No problem. You were almost there, anyway. Does this mean that you'll stop calling me Up-Chuck?"

"Well . . . maybe for a week," Muriel replied, and they both laughed.

When she'd finished lunch, she walked out the front door and looked at the building. The windows in front didn't go all the way to the next floor. This left a long strip of building to try to fill. Suddenly, there it was.



ENVOY ENCLAVE ENTERPRISES

She grinned, and went back into her office. Behind her, she heard Mata say, "You know you're being an evil, nasty child, don't you? Ted gave you that little job to keep you out of his hair. He expected it to last at least a week."

"Well, he expected me to take a year to train, too. I can't help it if I'm good."

"Modest, too. Anything else?" asked Mata.

"Not really. I thought I'd made a mistake once, but I was wrong." They both started laughing.

"What are you two laughing about?" Ted asked as he came in.

Mata and Muriel looked at each other, then at Ted, and both said, "YOU!" at the same time, and started laughing again.

Ted shook his head, not understanding the female mind, then turned around and started for the door. He never made it. One look across the street showed him the new sign, and he started laughing.

"OK, you got me. And that looks good. Nice logo, too," he said. "Now, if you two are through fooling around, I'd like to borrow Muriel for a little."

"Sure, boss. I'm with you," Muriel quipped back, and followed him out, and to his office. The unknown invader was still sitting in a chair, and sweating. "Ted, have you allowed him bathroom privileges?"

"No, I didn't think he deserved them," Ted replied.

"Bart, would you ask someone to escort him to the restroom, please?"

"Yes, ma'am," Bart replied, and translated the man out of his seat and to the bathroom.

"Good cop, bad cop?" asked Ted.

"Well, you tried your way. But actually it's more like bad cop and soft spoken worst cop," she replied with an evil grin. "Now, he's going to meet the person he was sent to meet, and he isn't going to like it. And he's either going to tell us everything he knows, or he's going to jail."

"Muriel, have I told you, lately, that I LIKE the way you think."

"Hush, now. I need to 'make a call' to see if I can do it up right." Muriel went unfocused for a minute, then grinned again and said, "It's all set up. And the reason I sent him to the restroom. I'd hate to have him wet himself when he finds out the options he has are all bad."

Bart brought the individual back to Ted's office, and indicated that he should sit. He indicated it by placing him in front of a chair and pushing. Muriel grinned at the look on the man's face.

"Now, before we begin, I think you should see this," she said, pulling out her passport and handing it to him. She gave him a moment to examine it and look inside, then retrieved it by the simple expedient of pulling it out of her 'no pocket' again, then putting it back. "As you can see, my name is Muriel, and I'm the Ambassador from Home to America. And the last person who wanted to see me tried to kill me. In fact, he tried it in front of an FBI officer. He should be away for a long time for attempted murder. That's not counting whatever treaty violations he committed along with that. I leave such things to my lawyers."

"So, now that I have your attention, let's start with your name. I really hate referring to you as 'hey, you'."

"My name isn't necessary," he began.

"I'm afraid it is. We could result to a strip search and get your identification that way. Of course," she continued in her soft voice, "you might have some objection to the full body cavity search that's part of it. You see, we not only do the ears, nose, mouth and rectum, but also one other orifice that most men object to having probed." Ted just covered his eyes with his hands and winced.

"So, let's try this again. You wanted to see me. It's only polite to introduce yourself. I've introduced myself, now it's your turn. What is your name?"

"Um . . . I really can't tell you," he said.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Very well, I've asked a friend of mine if she'd be willing to help me. I'll just call her in, then. I'm sure you won't mind a member of the United States Secret Service being an observer. Or arresting officer, as the case may be."

"Were you talking about me?" Melanie said, from beside her. "Hi, mister nobody. My name is Melanie Carter," she said, showing her badge and identification, "and I'm a Secret Service officer. In fact, I'm the head of the President's Detail. And, do you know, I do believe I know who you are, Mister Alan Walker. In fact, I know the law firm you belong to. One of the powerful ones in Washington and New York. You're a long way from home, boy. I do hope you have a good reason to be."

"Muriel," Melanie went on, getting information from Mata, "he's registered in Washington as a lobbyist. So it's either money or a lawsuit."

“Look, I really must speak to the Ambassador alone,” Walker said.

“Nope. Not going to happen, Mr. Walker,” Muriel said. “One person trying to kill me was enough. You had your opportunity to make this just between you and the representatives of Enclave and Home. Now, you've added a Secret Service officer to the mix with your reluctance to be polite. I'm sure, if she takes you back to D.C. that she can find out what's going on. So, now we know who you are and who you work for. Now it's time to explain who you are representing. Please speak up, Mr. Walker. I think you'd REALLY hate to go back to D.C. as a failure and arrested. You do know that it would be plastered all over the media, don't you? And that you and your law firm would likely lose business as a result of it. Who are you representing.”

“Well, it's a consortium. I'm really not allowed to tell you more. Client confidentiality, you understand.”

“Nope. Don't understand at all. After all, I'm just a little girl that you think you can order around and ignore. And in this country I have the right to face my accusers. I'll have the name of the consortium and the individual that sent you.” By this time Muriel was very happy that she'd sent him to the bathroom before she started questioning him.

“Never mind, Muriel. He's not going to talk. I'll just take him back with me, and we'll find out, there. I'll have our friends in the FBI raid his offices, too. We should pull in the whole thing at once. What you've been working on is something that's taken the President's interest in a big way. And he's anxious to meet the people that think they can run the country from behind the scenes – and run it into the ground for their profit.”

By this time, Walker was nearly in tears. Bart was watching him like a hawk to be sure he didn't do something stupid. He already knew the man didn't have a 'poison tooth' or some such device to suicide with. But he wasn't taking any chances.

“All right. The consortium is actually an unlisted firm that controls a private equity investment group, as well as several hedge funds. The man making the offer is supposedly with the private equity group, but is actually on the board of several banks and hedge funds and a few other things. He wants to offer you, Ambassador Muriel, one million dollars, personally, plus ten billion for the six companies. Oh, and the holding company.”

“Name, Mr. Walker. I want his name. I'd like to send him a thank you card . . . Ted, quit laughing, you'll spoil my pitch . . . a thank you card for his wonderful offer that doesn't even match my yearly salary, but my regrets that I cannot accept it. NAME, Mr. Walker. Now. I'm growing impatient. Soon, I'll stop being nice.”

“Lady, if that's being nice, then I hope to hell I NEVER see you angry.” And he gave her the name. Melanie disappeared. “I'm dead,” he said.

“Not if we can help it,” Muriel said. “Bart, do we have some place we can stash him for the time being?”

"How about with me," Caleb said.

"Caleb! When did you get back?" Muriel said.

"Just now. Thought I'd check in with you, and you were missing. Figures that it would be with Ted," he said with a grin. "So, why are we stashing a lawyer?"

"To keep him from getting killed," Muriel said. "I don't think he's ready to go to Home the hard way. Judgment, you know. We just need to keep him under cover until we can roll up these people."

"Yea, I heard about that. So, you're that close?"

"Melanie's gone to see about picking up one, now," Muriel said.

"Hmm. Well, if anyone can, she and her crew can. I take it she's tracking on the individual, not a location? Tricky. It can be done, but it's really tricky."

"What's tricky?" Melanie asked.

"Tracking on an individual rather than a location," Caleb said.

"Not when you're used to following GPS tracking on a car, and locating it. Same idea, only you track on the individual, then expand to see where he is. We got him. His accounts are frozen, even the off shore ones. We're booking him on treaty violation charges and attempted bribery. Mr. Walker, you're now State's evidence. That should clear you. We need you to call your firm and get them to turn over everything they have. The alternative is a warrant and raid."

"Pull the raid. Kill power first, though, or they'll destroy the electronic evidence. Don't take chances with them. Surround the building so they can't leave, kill the power, then bring them all out."

"OK, we'll play it your way," Melanie said. She went unfocused for a minute, then said, "They're getting the warrant, now. The raid will be about ten minutes after. Muriel, how'd you kill the power on that one job we did together."

"Not her, me," Ted said. "A shield can stop electricity, too. And without damaging the line. So when you put the shield in place, get EVERYTHING out. That way, when the power goes back on you don't have fried machines."

"Got it." Melanie sent that to her crew, too. "Now, what do we do with him?"

"Sanctuary," Muriel said. "Well, it's equivalent. We hold him here, with his permission, and no one can reach him. All he has to do is say the words 'I request asylum'."

"I request asylum from Home and the Envoy Enclave," Walker said.

"Caleb, you have a place for him?" Muriel asked.

"Yep. Over my office. No stairs, no elevator. Only way in or out is to translate. One of Ted's squads should be finishing it up, now. All the comforts of home with a small 'h'. Two way link like an intercom so I can let him know when I'm coming in. Television, radio, stereo, bed, kitchen which will be well stocked, and they're willing to even cook for him. Even keep him company, if he wants. Oh, and the intercom will allow him to get in touch with us if there's something he needs. One of Ted's squad members has volunteered to take him there and show him around, make any changes he'd like, and show him how the intercom works."

"Wait! Why are you doing this? I mean, just a few minutes ago you were threatening me with all sorts of things that I don't even want to think about. And now you're giving me a place to stay that sounds like it's better than what I actually live in, people to keep me company and even cook for me? Why?"

"Because we don't judge. You'll get that when you get to Home. And everybody goes Home. That's where you go when you die. You'll face a harsher judgment, then, then anything we could do. I know. I've been there, alive, and came back, alive. And I was judged," Muriel said.

"So did I," Melanie said. "She isn't kidding. I never wanted to go back again. Then went back twice. Once to see friends that I'd served with and had been killed. Then once to see my father who had died when I was ten. Oh, I've been back many times since then, but those two were the hardest, and the greatest."

"So, you'll go, too, someday. We're giving you the opportunity to clean yourself up, judge yourself here before you have to go. Same reason we'll protect you while you're here. To give you a chance when you get to Home," Muriel said.

Chapter 27

Banks, Lawyers, and Software

(Wednesday morning)

"Yes, sir. What we did shouldn't be possible. But it was. And it could happen again, given the right circumstances. Yes sir, I agree that something has to be done. But it means doing something that Congress and Treasury have resisted doing. Well, actually two things. First, the stock and commodities markets and banks have to be brought under control. Yes, sir, I know there's opposition to it. But that's what has to be done. As long as the currency is controlled by banks and Wall Street this can still happen. That's how the money got consolidated in one place and what has caused recessions and depressions in the past. And in the future if this merry-go-round isn't stopped. Yes, sir. I'll be here, sir."

Muriel just stared at Ted, sitting in her casual area. "Ugh," Ted said. "THAT phone call I could have done without this early in the morning. And on top of everything else, it's raining." Muriel tried very hard to hid a snicker. "Go ahead, laugh," he said. I've never liked rain."

"So," Muriel said, "is he going to do it?"

"He'd better, or there'll be another, bigger crash within the month. GAD! You'd think the banks would be smarter than this. The banks started the hedge funds to hide some of the shenanigans that they'd been pulling with stock manipulation. And the hedge funds started private equity, to further hide their nefarious deeds. Nobody stopped to think that what they could do to manipulate the stock market could be used against them. We just did a major job on the resources of some of the banks by pulling those companies private. They didn't think it could be done, and that they could find a way to get them back under their control. Had the companies stayed in the stock market, they probably could have. As it is, there could be a serious run on the banks as they start crashing, requiring somebody to bail them out."

"So, bail them out. Bail them out by requiring that they turn themselves over to us. I'd say a merger, but we're not a bank. But the same idea. We control the bank, we control the money, and Congress screams that the country is being taken over by foreigners," Muriel said.

"Hmm. Simplistic, but an outline. Let me think about it," Ted said.

"OK, while you're thinking about it, you called Triple E a holding company. Just what does that mean?" Muriel asked.

"Well, that's a company that holds a controlling interest in another company, and who's sole business is to be the major investor. DUH! Banks often act as holding companies, which is how they got control of the businesses to begin with. So, in a sense, we're already a bank. We just have to move backward a bit. You and I are the only shareholders. We're going to

need more people to act as an organizing group and board of directors, oh, and other shareholders. Shareholders! Of course, I'm stupid. If we buy out sufficient of the shareholders to control the board, we effectively take over the bank. Then pull it private. OK, I've got some work to do." And Ted disappeared.

"Well . . . that was informative . . . I think," Muriel said to nobody. She got up and wandered out to Mata's desk.

"No," Mata said. "No, don't go bother Frederica. She's got things just barely under control, right now. Let it work for a while, and work the bugs out. She'll contact you if she has a problem," Mata said.

"Sheesh! Everybody knows what I'm thinking except me." Mata snickered at Muriel's comment. "Am I that easy to read?" Muriel asked.

"Not really. But there are times when it just comes blasting through. Usually when you feel that you have nothing to do," Mata said, looking up from her computer. "Here's an idea. Go talk to your trainers about a dump of how copyright, patent and trademarks work. I have a feeling we're going to need them. And soon. Especially trademarks, as you just created one with that Logo. By the way, it looks good." Mata looked back down at her computer, as if dismissing Muriel.

So Muriel wandered back to the break-room and looked for Betty. She explained what Mata had said, and immediately received a dump which Betty said would open up in about a half an hour. As she wandered back toward the front of the building she saw Frederica at Mata's desk.

"Oh, there you are. Muriel, I just got word from that software company. They broke the code," Frederica said.

"Well, can they fix it?"

"No, no. Not that kind of break. And yes, they think they fixed it – as in made it better. The code for the office suite was filled with binary blobs that, on the surface, couldn't be taken apart. But the records for it existed, though they were horribly confused. Anyway, they finally figured out how the binary blobs were constructed and what they did, and re-wrote them in standard programming language. Ran some traces, and found things they could do to simplify the code. It's now smaller, tighter, faster, and does more than before. They want to know if they can release it," Frederica said in a fountain of words.

"OK. But I want the Triple E logo on the package, and maybe the words, 'under new management' should be added. Also, won't we need some advertising?" Muriel asked.

"Already being worked on. We'll have to know the twist to make the logo stand out like it was three dimensional and off the paper. Or cardboard. Or whatever."

"One Envoy from each company. I'll show them the trick, and they can apply it. This is

NOT to be let out to the general public. It takes the training to do it, and I'm not even sure that I'd trust a human with it, even trained. And I won't tie up a manager with just applying a logo. Oh, and they can be done in batches. So, send me six Envoys, one from each company, and I'll teach them. What about advertising?" Muriel asked.

"We're looking for a good advertising company, now. The one that that company used kept telling us we need to 'over-exaggerate' our claims, or no one would believe us. And I'm just not comfortable with that," Frederica said.

"Good. Oh, did they manage to get the industry standard format put into the software?"

"Yes," said Frederica. "That was one of the improvements, and one of the reasons that it took so long to put it together. It was in there, but in such a messed up way that it wouldn't really work. Finally they just pulled it and put in clean code. NOW it works, and for all the sub-programs within the main suite. They also checked with the open source community concerning that standard, and that community showed them how to make it work."

"I though you couldn't mix open source and commercial code." Muriel said.

"You can, but it has to be as a plugin, not part of the commercial code. So, that's what our people did, then donated it back to the open source community. THAT raised eyebrows, I can tell you. This company was out to destroy anything open source. Now, we're saying, that under the new management, that's gone away and we'll play nice."

"Well, I've got to see about turning the Triple E into a trademark, so if you'll excuse me"

"Oh, here. Just sign these and we'll send them back. Then we're covered," Frederica said.

So, Muriel signed, after reading the paperwork. It all seemed straight forward. And there was a note on it from the Enclave lawyers that it was legitimate. The only other thing she had to do was include a copy of it, which she created on the spot. The lawyers had even seen to it that both the long name and the Triple E nickname were included as trademarks or whatever. She also noted that the lawyers had used only her first name and title as Ambassador for her signature. She wondered how legal that was. But they should know.

Frederica looked the paperwork over, then translated it to the lawyers. "Oh, by the way," she said, "we're training the lawyers, at least those that can take the training. It makes it easier to get things done. Two of them are about to make their trip to Home, but we're holding them until the whole group can do it. There are some noses out of joint about the trained ones being senior among the lawyers."

"I'll get right on that. Having them trained gives them an edge that the others don't have. So they can either clean up their dirty secrets or find work elsewhere. Or accept their lower position in the firm," Muriel said. "I'll go right now, in fact. See you later." Muriel translated to the reception area of the law firm.

"Yes, miss? May I help you?" the receptionist asked.

"I'm Muriel. I'll see all the lawyers in the conference room, now."

"I'm sorry, miss, but someone just walking in off the street can't make such a demand on the attorneys' time."

Muriel's eyes glowed, her stripes glowed, and she quietly took out her passport hand handed it to the woman. "Read that." ::ATTENTION!:: she sent in a forced send to everyone in the building. ::This is Muriel. I will see all lawyers in the conference room, now:: "As for you," she added to the receptionist, "if I were you I'd learn who your boss is in any job you have after this. You just met yours – an Ambassador with a very short fuse."

She left the woman, her eyes bugged out, by the simple expedient of translating to the conference room. She took the head of the table – yes, she'd finally learned that that little action held significance for others – and waited as the lawyers assembled. When they were all in and seated she began.

"It's come to my attention that some of you have been taking Envoy training. Congratulations. This is possibly worth as much to you as your law degree and passing the bar. For those of you that have not taken it, the reason you were left out is because you declined the training or you can't achieve a mental link. If you can't achieve the mental link, it is most likely because there are things in your past that you don't want others to know about, thus blocking the ability to link. You've closed yourselves off. So, in order to maintain order in the firm, here are your choices. Those with training will be ranked first. There may be ranks among them, but they are senior to anyone without the training. So, you can clean up your minds and take the training, or you can accept the lower ranking, or you can look for work elsewhere. Is that understood?"

The shocked looks on some of the faces made her realize that she'd just stepped on a number of toes. "I'm not doing this to be nasty," she said. "I'm doing this because those with the training are better able to get things done quickly, no matter where in the country they may need to go. I'm doing this because those with the training can ask questions and receive answers or discussions in a way that outsiders can't break, can't record, and can't use against us. It's as simple as that. Add to that the fact that those with the training are able to protect themselves against anything that can be thrown at them. This includes bullets, grenades, missiles, chain bombs, tanks, poisons, and anything else you can think of."

"Now," she added, "I understand that some of you are ready to take the trip to Home and back. Good. As for those of you that have started the training and aren't up to that point, yet, how far are you?"

Four of them looked at each other for a moment, then one said, "Muriel, we started later. We don't want to hold back the others. Right now, we need to learn how to translate, then we can go with them. Or they can go whenever you wish, and we'll go when we've reached that point."

“OK. I need to know a time when I can complete your training, then. Then I'll go with each of you, one at a time, to Home and back. You others that haven't been trained at all, I'll expect a decision from you by the end of the day. That doesn't mean that I expect you to be able to start the training immediately. But it does mean that you must make a decision as to whether you will TRY to clean yourselves up, accept the lower status, or leave. There will be no more petty bickering, back-biting, or claims of it being unfair. That's not the way Enclave is run,” Muriel said. Then she added, “and someone had better instruct your receptionist as to who is who in Enclave. One just doesn't tell one's boss that she can't do something.” Muriel translated back to her office.

There, she found Mata hanging onto her desk with both hands, like it was trying to get away. “Is the earthquake over?” Mata asked. Muriel just laughed, and Mata joined her.

“So, how'd you find out?” Muriel asked.

“One of the legal secretaries called over and wanted to know what got into you. I finally found out that you'd ripped up their receptionist, then called out all the lawyers. What was that all about?” Mata asked.

“Putting out a fire. Some of the lawyers are ready to take the trip Home. Some are still in need of training. And some declined the training or can't make the mental link, and were complaining that they should be senior to some of the others. Then to add to it, the receptionist didn't know who I was, and wouldn't call the lawyers to conference for me to settle the issue. The last was what tripped my trigger. Anyone here should know at least who Ted and I are, as well as Bart and you. Maybe Frederica, too. Anything coming from us takes priority. And no, the power's not going to my head, though I may have given that impression when I talked to them.”

“Um”

“Yes, Mata. I'll clean up after myself. But I think it would be a good idea for it to settle in a bit before I go back.” Mata just grinned at her. “Anything else come in?”

“Yes, you had a phone call from some outfit that makes an office suite. They wanted to thank you for something. I checked out the name. They make an open source program that does similar things to our new one. It was the head of the outfit that called. Here's the number if you're interested.”

“I think I know what that's about. The programmers in our software company rewrote a lot of the program, and included a plugin for the approved standard format. Then they sent a copy back up the line to the outfit that used it. I'll call him. Anything else?”

“Not just yet. How'd you do getting the information on copyright, patents and trademarks?”

“It should be opened up, now. But I haven't tested it, yet. I will after I make the call.”

Muriel returned to her office, and mentally punched in the numbers, and identified herself to the secretary that answered. She passed the call to her boss without comment. It took a couple of seconds before he picked up.

“Madam Ambassador! I didn't expect you to call me back,” a male voice said.

“Just Muriel, please. I think I know what this is about, and just wanted to check with you,” Muriel said.

“It seems that you've made a difference in the program that comes out of your newly acquired company. One of your programmers sent us a copy of a plugin for the ISO standard formats, and it's under the General Public License. Did you authorize it?”

“Yes, of course. I can't see any reason why we can't get along. We're both in the same line of work, but have products that are a bit different. And, of course, ours costs money, and not everyone can afford it. No reason why we shouldn't be able to work things out so that people can use either program without difficulties, and be able to convert cleanly between them,” Muriel said.

“WOW! This is vastly different than the attitude we were getting before. We'd even been threatened with patent lawsuits,” he said.

“If you happen to know the numbers of the patents, I'd appreciate knowing what ones. In the mean time, I'll tell the lawyers to kill all lawsuits until I've had a chance to review and see if there's a real problem. Part of the reason that Enclave was able to buy the company was because they were working themselves into a hole with unreal expenditures. And, I'm not sure, from things I've heard, that patents are actually valid on software. I may be able to do something about this.”

“Are you sure you're Ambassador Muriel?” he asked.

“Hold on a second, please.” ::Mata, I need a squad. We're going to introduce ourselves.::

::OK, I'm coming, too. Squad two is up. Meet you out front.::

“Sorry for the delay. I think the best thing would be for me to see you in person so that you'll have confirmation of who I am. Do you have a room that can handle you and I plus six people? If so, go there, please.” Muriel followed the man, mentally, as he moved to another room, and in the mean time moved to meet her squad and Mata.

“OK, I'm there.”

“And so am I,” said Muriel into the phone and aloud, as she translated in. One of Muriel's squad quickly placed a chair behind the shocked man and got him seated in it.

"You're children!" he said.

"Well, actually, I'm a child. The rest are Envoys, and they can look any way they want to." Muriel pulled out her passports and handed them to the man. "These should show you that I'm me. How many programmers have you got working on this part of your software?"

"Um . . . six, I think."

"OK, hold on." ::Frederica, do we have any of the new software packaged up yet?::

::Just CD cases and inserts, Muriel. They do have the keys on the back.::

::Good, can I get six? I'll put the logos on, here. It's for the 'competition', so they can check that things work right both ways.::

::Yes. Here.:: Six CD cases dropped into Muriel's outstretched hands. She laid them on the table, and applied the Triple E logo at the top left corner.

"Here you go. These are the latest version of our software. It'll be going out to the public, soon. Just have your people check that conversion works right both ways. If you have problems, let us know. There's no sense putting it out and just having to make changes later. That does neither of us any good. I'd rather do it right the first time."

"Please tell me that I'm not dreaming," he said. "We've been fighting so long . . . and now you just hand it to me, like it was nothing at all." He looked up at her. "This isn't a joke, is it?"

"No joke, and no dream. And you've got my number, now, and can reach me if you don't get satisfaction out of the company. I'm actually head of the holding company that owns it, and we drive how things will get done, and make suggestions as to directions they should go. And Enclave, and the Envoys believe in honesty."

Chapter 28

Lunch and Lawyers (Wednesday afternoon)

When she left the software foundations offices, Muriel translated directly to a restaurant. She was ordering lunch when a group of lawyers approached her and asked if they could join her. She recognized some of them as being in the group in the Enclave lawyer's office.

"We may need a bigger table," she said.

"No problem," her waiter said, "just a second." And promptly two more tables were added to hers to accommodate the influx.

"So, what's up?" she asked.

"Well," one said, after they'd ordered, "we're the ones that didn't take the training. We thought it was just some clique thing. Well, some of us may have had problems with trying to create a mental link. But most of us just thought it was like a lodge ceremony or something. We'd like to try again, if you don't mind."

"As a matter of fact, I was going to come over after lunch. I need to speak to your receptionist, too. Look, I know I was hard on you people, but I don't think you realized just how useful and valuable the training is. For example, you're driving down the road to reach an appointment. The phone rings and you answer, and the next thing you know, you're in an accident. OK, now with training, you aren't answering a phone. Therefore no distraction. But even better, with the training you aren't driving down the road. You simply go from one place to another directly. You saw me leave. I went directly from your conference room to my office."

"Now think," she went on, "about the amount of time you spend in the air going to another city. Melanie Carter is the head of the President's detail in D.C. She came out here by plane, at some cost to her and on her own time. She went back by simply translating there directly to her apartment. Would you say that a savings in time and money was worth a little training? Two to four days, max?" The group nodded.

"Now, that's third level stuff," she said. "Even before that you learn to make shields. Maybe you won't get anyone angry enough to shoot at you. Maybe you will. I'll guarantee that a personal shield will stop a bullet. I stopped five at once to pass my test. We don't do it that way any more. We don't need to, and it's too noisy. We just have a kid attack you with a baseball bat. Oh, by the way, he's a trainer, too, and a friend of mine, and we don't pull the test until we're sure that you can pass. Plus you're backstopped. If your shield fails, your trainer's shield on you won't."

"But even better is that after you've managed to create and maintain a shield, you learn to dress yourself. Yes," she said, "I'm sure you learned when you were kids. But I'm talking about something different. How much do you spend on a suit? Two hundred dollars? Three? How about free. And never have to clean it, or shirts, or underwear, or socks. Shoes that would always stay polished. What would that be worth to you? Would it be worth four days? I know that a lot of your image as an attorney is exactly that: image; first impression; lasting impression."

"Well, there's a price to pay for it. You have to be open enough to make a mental link, because all the training is done either through it or in conjunction with it. So, if the reason you can't make a link is because of something in your past that you're ashamed of, find a way to resolve it. Go apologize to someone or make restitution, or something. And if it's something that can't be resolved, then it would be better for you and us if you looked for work elsewhere. I'm not being mean. I'm being practical. I'm being honest. I know it sounds harsh, but life is harsh, sometimes. If there's even a remote chance that you can make a mental link, but don't manage on the first try, well, neither did that kid that I told you about that's a trainer. I could see him trying. I could see him putting in the effort, but he just wasn't connecting. He was trying too hard, over-thinking it. So I calmed him down and gave him some incentive, and he made it."

"It takes work. Once you've got the basics, it takes work to perfect them, and for that you're on your own. We'll get you proficient in the basics, but there's much more you can do, depending on your imagination. We'll show you what we've learned, but you'll find things for yourself that make life easier. However, one thing that won't take work. You spend what? Seven years? Eight? In college. And it was hard and you sweated, and maybe you've forgotten most of what you learned. We can give you instruction that isn't the training, but again relies on the basic ability to make a link, all in one dump that unfolds in your mind. That's how I go to school, and I'm already about five or six years ahead of what a normal twelve year old would be at. That's not counting things that I need to learn for my job. So, is it worth the price of a couple of days?"

"People, Saturday's coming. Any of you that want to learn, see me in the training room behind the main desk at the Guest House at eight o'clock Saturday morning. The rest? Well, you'll just have to figure out your own lives. I'm giving you the same chance that I was given. I can't do more than that. I'm not going to take you by the hand and say 'pretty please'. It's your life, and you've got to make your own decisions."

The rest of the meal was spent in thoughtful silence. The lawyers thinking about their job, and Muriel thinking about how to talk to the receptionist. She was kind. She took the lawyers back to their office by translating.

The receptionist snapped up out of her seat like a new recruit in the Army. "Madam Ambassador."

Muriel sighed, "Just Muriel, please. I'm not always an ogre. I just expect that people in Enclave know who I am. I'm sorry I snapped at you."

“Ma'am”

“Muriel, please.”

“M . . . M . . . Muriel, it's my fault. They showed me your picture, but with everything else, I just got confused and thought you were someone they were trying to filter out.”

“Relax. It's over. And a thought occurred to me. I wondered if any of the regular staff might want the training that I've had, and most of your attorneys have had. Is there a way I can ask them?”

“Oh, yes ma'am”

“Just Muriel. I'm only twelve, and ma'am makes me feel old.”

The receptionist gave a nervous snicker, then said, “I'll just call the office manager. She can handle it. When you said regular staff”

“Yes, that includes you, if you qualify. There's a test you have to pass to get the training. No, it's nothing you can study for. It's whether you can make a mental link,” Muriel said.

“Oh” She looked crestfallen.

“Look at me. Come on. Look at me, see what I look like. See how far away from me you are. Now close your eyes and reach out with your mind, like it was your hand, and touch my shoulder.”

::??::

::That's it. You can be trained.::

“I CAN!”

“Yes, you can be just as obnoxious and overbearing as I am.” That set the receptionist to laughing. And just at that time the office manager appeared.

“Susan! What have I told you about being familiar with people.”

“Probably too much,” Muriel said. “And that would explain why she was so confused this morning. Do you know me?”

“No, I don't,” the woman replied in a stern, condescending voice.

“Then get your things and leave,” Muriel said. “I'm your boss. To be exact, I am Ambassador Muriel, and you're fired. Susan, would you call her second, please?” She turned back to the astonished woman and said, “Are you still here? I can help you to the front

gate if you like, and we'll just send your things after you."

"But, you're just a little girl!"

"Yep. Twelve years old. Going on forty," she said, and took her passport out of her pocket and handed it to her. "And I've been through this 'misunderstanding' too many times in this office. I can understand it from a receptionist. Not condone it, but understand it. But from the office manager, it's inexcusable. Git."

"Why you little" And she disappeared.

"Where'd she go?" Susan asked.

"The front gate. I DO keep my promises. I had entirely too much of that attitude in the city school. Bullies. Think they can get by on bluster and pomposity. I don't put up with it."

"Susan? . . . Oh, hi, Muriel. Can we help you?"

"Maybe. Are you the assistant office manager?"

"Why, yes. Isn't she out here? I thought Susan called her. I know she left the office."

"Yes, she left the office. She's being held at the main gate, right now. You're the new office manager. I'll explain later. But there's two things I'd like you to do. First is gather up your predecessor's things and bring them out. I'll take them out to her. Then, after that, if you'd ask around the staff and see if anyone would like to try for the training, I'd appreciate it. Oh, by the way, what's your name?" Muriel asked.

"Oh! I'm Beth. Short for Bethany. My father thought I was a town," she said, and snickered. "Never mind. Kinda an inside joke. It's a town in Upstate New York, near where I come from. I'll get right on it."

"Now," Muriel said to Susan, "I've got some lawyers that I'll be training starting Saturday morning at eight o'clock, in the training room behind the main desk in the Guest House. You come, and I'll see that you're trained."

"Um . . . will I, you know, have to take my clothes off?"

"Yes, but don't be upset. We'll divide it off so they can't see you, and you can't see them. It's only for a short while, while you learn how to make your own clothes."

"Um . . . I don't sew very well."

"Not that kind of 'make'. Like this," and Muriel changed to formal wear, then to jeans and shirt, then back to Class A's. "It's easy once you catch onto the knack. And it saves a lot on the clothing allowance. Better?"

"Yea. Some of those lawyers I wouldn't trust with my clothes off. In fact, some of them I wouldn't trust with my clothes ON."

"Trust me, before you reach that point you'll never have to worry about that again. There's a video from a media feed about me that will show you what I mean, if you can find it. If not, come by my office. We have a copy," Muriel said with a smile. "They'd never be able to touch you."

"OK," Beth said, "Here's her things. Would you like me to take them out to her?"

"That won't be necessary. Let's see. I think formals," and she switched again. "And I'll be right back. Could you see about . . ."

"Oh, you bet." Beth said, as Muriel translated out. "I've GOT to learn how she does that stuff."

And at the front gate, Muriel appeared and walked toward the previous office manager, glowing all over, and using another trick of shielding to create a breeze that blew her plaid back. She handed the woman the box containing her things and said, "You're through here. You won't be allowed back inside. I won't have an obnoxious, overbearing snob polluting Enclave." Then turned and translated back to the lawyers office.

"Muriel? Were you just . . . glowing?" Susan asked.

"Oh, yea. Showy, but it's just an illusion of sorts. Sorry." She switched back to Class A's. "So will you show up, Saturday?"

"You just bet I will! If I have to crawl through broken glass. You mean I'd be able to do that stuff?"

"That and a lot more. It does take work to learn, but it doesn't take long. Usually one to two days. My parents are the other end of the curve. It took them four, and they didn't complete it until later. They didn't feel they needed to."

"You really are . . . human?" Susan asked, and you could see that she was afraid she'd insulted Muriel.

Muriel just laughed. "Oh, yes. I really am a twelve year old girl, and I do have parents. I'm not an Envoy. If you haven't met Envoys before, you'll have a chance on Saturday. Look, you're an employee here. You ever go to any of the restaurants or anything?"

"Oh, no. She," and Muriel got that she was indicating the previous manager, "didn't think it was seemly that a mere employee should do anything like that. No, it was straight in and straight out, and that's it."

"Well, that just changed. There never was such a thing as a 'mere employee'. Employees and Guests have the same rights as I do, here. You go into a restaurant and the

manager and waiters or waitresses will know immediately who you are. You'll be served whatever you want, and you won't be charged. She should have told you that. I think I'm very glad, now, that I threw her out."

"You mean, she was holding out on us?"

"More than that, she was trying to bully you. And I hate bullies," Muriel said.

Beth came back out at that point and said, "Yes. All of them. Oh, while you were out, Susan explained about the test, so I told them. I hope that was all right. And they all said that they'd be there just for the chance to try for the training. Oh, I hope I pass."

"Susan," Muriel said, mock sternly, "you mean to say that you didn't pull it on her?"

"Who, me?" Susan squeaked. "I'm not a trainer. What if I got it wrong?"

"Well, there's not much you can do to get it wrong, so, you try it. Go on. I'll be here to help, if you need it. You remember how I did with you?"

Susan took a deep breath, and said, "OK, here goes." And she walked Beth through the same routine that she'd been through. And the look on both their faces was positively beautiful.

"There you go. You're in, Beth. And Susan, you did very well. Now you know why Ted has a twelve year old girl as the one in charge of training. It's so easy even I can do it."

"Bull," said Susan. "You're in because you have a way of making people believe that they CAN do it. Even teaching. Oh, boy. I'm going to have some fun, tonight. I've wanted a good meal that wasn't my cooking for a long time."

"Just remember, don't bother buying any clothes. Once you're trained you'll be able to go to the shops here, and see what they have, and create it for yourself. Oh, and the Envoys are really happy to help you do it, too. They'll even help you make changes or whatever to bring out the best in you. Melanie Carter told me that, after she went looking in some of the shops after she was trained. And I meant what I said about dropping by the office. I'm not always there, like Friday I'll be away. But when I am, and if I'm not busy I'll be happy to see you and show you around. Heck, even if I am busy, there's about twenty Envoys that would bend over backward to show you around and introduce you to my friends, and stuff."

"I just can't believe I'm hearing this," Susan said. "This morning I thought I was going to be sacked, and now it's like I've been invited to the princes ball in a fairy tale."

Muriel looked around at her backside, and said, "Nope. No tail." And they all laughed. "Well, I'd better be going. I've kept you from your work long enough."

"Just a moment, young lady." A man had come through the door and now addressed Muriel.

::I don't know who this person is, but I think he just lost his job.:: Muriel sent to Susan and Beth. Then, in a broadcast, ::I want the head attorney at the front desk, now. This is Muriel. Translate.::

"I want to know who you are, and why you think you can just waltz in here and take up the staff's valuable time," the man said.

"Interesting," said Muriel. "It seems to be an epidemic. Do you work here?" she asked the man. "What do you do? Janitorial? Mail room?"

"That will be quite enough of that, child. You're leaving, now." he said, and went to grab her. Muriel, unfortunately for him, 'forgot' to turn off the sticky portion of her shield and both of his hands were stuck there.

"Charles," a voice from behind him said, "what do you think you're doing?"

"This person has been taking up the time of our staff, just fooling around. She's also managed to send our office manager someplace. I can't find her to get any work done," Charles said, as he struggled to free himself.

"Uh, huh. And you just managed to get yourself stuck in that ridiculous position trying to grab her and remove her. Right?" asked the new man.

"It's just some sort of trick. Children shouldn't be allowed in the office, anyway. Call security and have her removed," Charles said.

"Oh, I don't think that will be necessary," said Mata, popping up behind Muriel. "Since I'm her security chief. Oh, and before you start going off on children again, I think you should know something. I'm an Envoy. Technically, I rank higher than you on the organizational chart. Oh, and I'm not a child," she added and grew. And changed. And Mata – now Matthew – stood glaring at the still stuck Charles. "Muriel, be a good girl and let him go, so I can take him someplace quiet and question him."

"Oh, I don't think so, Mata. By the way, are you enjoying showing off like that? Never mind. I LIKE turning bullies into cringing cravens. I'll give you whatever's left," Muriel said. "By the way, ladies, remember when I talked about never having to be afraid of another man? I think this serves as a pretty good demonstration. This . . . person . . . this Charles has become stuck on me, a mere child. Now, I could charge my personal shield with about a thousand volts and give him an electrifying experience. Or I could create a shield like a spike, only about six feet long, and play 'Vlad the Impaler' with him. But that's a bit messy. Or, I could simply ask his boss what position he fills here."

"None, currently," the new man said. "He WAS the least senior attorney in the firm, Muriel. And the one that took up the time of the largest number of secretaries with things that were useless or pointless. Oh, and he seemed to be great friends with our former office manager. You know, the one you fired. Thank you, by the way."

“Really!” said Muriel. “You haven’t, by any chance, noticed that information seemed to leak out of the office, have you?”

“Well, as a matter of fact, yes. And in checking the ‘retired’ office manager’s desk, it would appear that all the things that were leaked are stored in her bottom left drawer. Oh, and they all seemed to originate from a certain attorney that’s recently been fired,” the senior partner said. “Oh, and he seems to be the source of the rumor that the training is just some sort of lodge thing, and worthless to real lawyers.”

“Uh, huh. Well, Charles, I think you should know something, here. There are two people that run Enclave. One of them is a tall male, brown hair, aggrieved expression on his face. Name of Ted. I’m sure you’ve probably heard of him at one time or another. He’s the leader of the Envoys of Home, and Ambassador to earth. The aggrieved expression is because he has to deal with a rather strange co-leader that’s always getting herself into trouble. So much trouble that it takes a whole law firm to keep things straight. This co-leader is a young girl by the name of Muriel. Heard that name recently?” Muriel asked. Then turning and looking at Matthew as if she’d just noticed that he was still in male form, said, “I think you can stop showing off, now, Mata.”

“Aw! You never let me have any fun. And just when I was going to really impress him,” Matthew said.

“Now, Mata, you know you don’t like . . . Mata?” Matthew was growing. “Oh, no. NO FEATHERS!” And grew wings. “Mata, really. I’ll have to restrict that grape and berry drink you seem to like so much.” And then a flaming sword appeared in Matthew’s hands. “That tore it. Feathers and flame? NOT a good combination. Fire hazard, you know.”

A whispered comment came from Beth, “Oh, sh . . . ! Do you realize what the Envoys really are? Oh, my god! THAT’S what Home is?”

“That’s enough, Mata. Now we’ve got to clean the rug,” Muriel said.

“Yea,” she said, removing sword, wings, size and gender and reverting to her child-like norm. “But it was SO worth it. Give him to me, Muriel. I’ll take him to Home, and we’ll find out EVERYTHING about him in minutes. We’ll even find out who he really works for. Five minutes on judgment square and he’ll crack like a baby.”

“It’s a possibility. But let’s give him a chance, first. You’d be just as likely to leave him there, and then we’d have all that paperwork to do explaining his being missing. How about it, Charles? Would you like to cooperate and get out of here alive? I think Mata’s getting a bit testy.”

And Charles talked. And talked. Names. Contact information. Organizational chart. Purpose. All of it. In the mean time, an attorney came out with a box – the personal contents of Charles’ desk and his suit coat. And Melanie showed up behind Muriel.

"OK, Muriel, I'll take it from here. Mata filled me in before I came. And I've got the record of his confession. This is a new group. But we'll roll them up. Where's the previous manager?"

"I believe she's hovering around a certain Town Car in the lot, waiting for him," Muriel said. The car may have something interesting in it, too. Need help?"

"Naw, I can handle this," Melanie said, and went into her official spiel. In short order Charles and his box of stuff had departed. Muriel cleaned up the floor so not even an odor of urine lingered.

Then she looked at the two women and man. "Oh, come on!" she said. "You HAD to have known that we got the training from somewhere. And Envoys? It means messenger. And it replaced a much older word with religious connotations. And EVERYBODY goes Home. Settle down, people. We're no different than we were."

"But . . . but . . .," Beth stuttered.

"But, nothing," Muriel said. "By the way, Mata, did you have fun?"

"Yea. I'm beginning to see why you're so outrageous. Being a bigger bully than the bullies is a blast. Sorry about the feathers and flame thing. You're right. In a confined space, not good." And Mata grinned.

"Hmm," Muriel said. "I think I've just been told off," and smiled back.

"Nope," said Mata. "Technically, that's what you are when you do that: a bigger bully. But you aren't being a bully all the time, only when attacked by a bully, and not even all the time then. No, you're not a bully in the sense of going around being aggressive all the time. But when someone tries to bully you, you DO tend to out do them. So, it's only technically bullying them."

Susan was looking back and forth between them, and finally said, "Are you people like this all the time?"

"Pretty much," Muriel said. "We banter, we goof, which I think was what Mata was doing with the feathers and sword, and we have fun. And we talk honestly to each other about ourselves. It saves a lot of pain when we take that long, hard look at ourselves to see whether we're being good."

"Home isn't in this universe, Susan," Mata said. "But it's so close that you can step across from one to the other if you know how. It's only real distinction is that when you go there you're suddenly made aware of all the things that you feel ashamed of, feel guilty about. Even, or maybe even especially, the things that you don't know you feel guilty about. Someone like Charles? He'd be crippled with the weight of it. Muriel? She went through it with no problems and even sought out a friend that had died a year before. Every one is different."

“What about you? Do you get hit with it?”

“No. Or at least not yet. Envoys aren't capable of judging. It's part of their makeup. But they can go bad. Maybe because Home really is our home, we don't feel it. But humans do. Look, we've got to get out of here and let you people work. Muriel said Saturday morning, so if you're still interested, we can talk then. I'll be with her and so will most of her security detail and maybe some of her friends. We'll get you people through the training, don't worry, and at least one of us will be with you when you make your trip to Home and back. And there'll be Envoys there, too, you know. We're protectors and nurturers. We can help with the feeling, and help you get yourself straight. OK?”

“OK. I guess. I'll see you Saturday, then. Bye.”

Mata and Muriel translated back to Muriel's office.

Chapter 29

Theories and Excuses (Thursday morning)

Muriel got up, dressed and ate rather lethargically. The squad that was on duty to make breakfast and clean up after her noted it and alerted Mata. Something was wrong. Muriel was just never like this. Something was bothering her, and that bothered them. So they called Mata.

::Muriel? Can I come up?:

::Sure, Mata::

“Hey, kid. What's the matter? You've got your squad worried about you,” Mata said.

“Oh, ge ez. I didn't mean to do that. I've just been doing some thinking. Actually, I'm glad you asked to come up, because I've got some questions. I mean, questions about Envoys,” Muriel said.

“Well, such as? And why all of a sudden, if I can ask.”

“Why now? Because of something I noticed, yesterday. When you played the 'A' card on Charles. The sword. And later when you told Susan that you were protectors and nurturers. That seemed to mix with other things I've seen, and it's been rolling around in my head since I got up,” Muriel said.

“OK, I'm going to stop you right there, for a minute. I think we need Ted and Bart in on this. Let me see if they're free for what sounds like a deep discussion.”

“OK. Ask them if they've had breakfast, too.”

::Ted? Bart? Discussion number one is back on the table. Muriel brought it up and wants answers. Are you free? And have you had breakfast?:

“I've had breakfast,” Ted said. “I don't even know if Bart eats.”

“I do, at times. And that looks good. Would you mind?” Bart said.

“Of course I don't mind,” Muriel said. And one of her squad quickly put breakfast in front of Bart. “Look, I don't mean to cause trouble, or anything. But some things started trying to combine in my head after yesterday, and I keep bumping up against possible answers. But they seem so ridiculous that it bothers me a bit. Yesterday, Mata played the 'A' card on that jerk lawyer. She went full blown, complete with a flaming sword, and I kidded her about fire around feathers not being a good idea. Then later, she told the receptionist that

Envoys were protectors and nurturers. And that did it. Something just didn't add up."

"Oh, oh," Bart said. "Mata, I see why you called it discussion number one. OK, we don't know where we came from, or what we did before we were enslaved. We don't know where humans came from, or how we were able to travel so easily between Home and earth. This is all stuff that Ted and I, and Mata too, for that matter, tossed around shortly after he made his grand entrance and turned everything upside down. We got nowhere with the discussion. And now it sounds like you're coming at it from another direction. Where do you want to start?"

"The sword. You're protectors. You can't kill, but you can handle a flaming sword. Both the sword and the fire are objects that can be used to attack. And as I've been told so often, the best defense is an all out assault. So you've got weapons, you must be able to use them."

"Well, we can kill under certain specific conditions," Mata said. "They all boil down to defense. Defense of self or defense of others. Mostly the latter. We can kill if we have to, but we can't be the aggressors."

"OK, so let's put that aside, for the moment and look at that statement of Mata's. You've always told me that Envoys were basically protectors. But yesterday, Mata, you specifically said 'protectors and nurturers'. That's a difference. That gives a reason for being protectors. Nurturers are ones that care about others, and you all do, but it goes beyond that. It also means that you teach, shelter, protect, guide, admonish, praise, and stuff like that. Now, what I'm going to suggest is circular reasoning, but I don't know any other way of putting it. Look at humans, particularly human mothers," Muriel said.

"Oh, gad. I see where she's going," Ted said. "She's just called Envoys real mothers."

"Despite the bad joke, Ted," Bart said, "I think she may be onto something. I told you that we couldn't remember whether or not we were involved with humans before the usurper came. Whether he came and found us, then humans, and enslaved us both, or whether he caused the creation of humans after he found us."

"How about the other way around? That he found humans first, then discovered Envoys?" Muriel said.

"Makes sense, as a possible theory. But I don't suppose we can ever prove it."

"I'm not looking at proof, right now. I'm looking at connections. And yes, I think Envoys are the parents of humans. Envoys are soul. Humans are soul in a body. Envoys can do amazing things. So can humans, when they're trained," Muriel said.

"Not only do, but out-do. Look at how many things you and your friends, and even other trainees have taught us to do. It's amazing. But, and this is a big but – not your big butt, Ted - to have made the decision to create humans would have been something creative, and we just aren't. Oh, we can carry ideas further, once they're introduced. But we can't

come up with that original idea,” Mata said.

“All right. But, as a supposition, let's say that humans are actually Envoys with bodies,” Muriel said. Bart immediately choked on what he was eating. Ted and Mata simply looked like they'd been hit in the stomach.

“Ted's been talking about having Envoys become human,” Mata finally said. “After all, the procedure is the same whether the soul is human or Envoy. Place the soul in a body and let it grow up.”

“A science fiction author wrote something like this in a rather famous, if dated, book. The idea was that we were all, collectively, god, and simply decided to become human and forget what we were for a while. To learn new things. Something like that,” Ted said. “And that when we die, we go back to being a part of that collective god. Kinda like a hive, where there are individual parts doing their job, but are all part of the same whole. His analogy didn't hold up to close examination, though.”

“It might,” Muriel said, “If you eliminate the god part of it. After all, what you people experienced was simply a parasite gorging itself off the enforced worship, rather than something that guided and protected. In fact, from what you've said, and from what I've seen in various religious books, he didn't do anything except demand worship. Not really, not after you strip out all the myth, legend, and embellishment. And quit looking at me like that, Mata. No, I haven't been dropped on my head.”

“No. But maybe you should be. No, I'm kidding. Bart! Did you ever have any contact with it?”

“No more so than you did, Mata. Same with every Envoy. I just checked. NOBODY ever had any real contact with it. It may not even have been a mind, or at least not one we would recognize. Just a parasite,” Bart said.

“So that would mean that Envoys were part of something, just not part of it. Envoys have a 'hive mind', a group mind, if you will. You act independently, but you know what others are doing and where there might be trouble. It isn't a hive mind in the sense of all being lead by one leader. That's obvious from the fact that you can, and do, tell Ted and I off whenever you feel like it. Yet you call us your leaders. You even taught us how to create that 'hive mind' between ourselves, as it's what we used in that game after Don's Envoy taught it to him,” Muriel said. “But Envoys use it all the time. It's part of you. When I told Mata about how I built my shield, how it differed from the one that Envoys had 'traditionally' used, it hit the 'hive mind' and went through it like warm prune juice through a human. In a very short period of time you could ALL do it, even Envoys that had never met me, or even knew about me.”

“Yes,” said Mata, “and you immediately became the darling of the Envoys, and got thrown into being a co-leader. Ted got it by the fact that he eliminated the parasite and gave us a real purpose. Or maybe put us back on track for our real purpose. But you surprised us by teaching us. Yes, I can see that.”

"What's disturbing," Ted said, "is that so can I. It makes sense, in a way. And you are still nurturing us. Still guiding us. Maybe by instinct, but still doing it. Bart, for example, finally getting me to face myself and straighten out my life enough to be balanced. Muriel with the number of times that she just took off on tangents, training her friends all at once, training unlikely people. Then Don, tackling something that could have killed him as his first experience as a trainer, and doing it from bits and pieces he'd learned from his Envoy. I'm beginning to see what the Envoys saw in you. I just wish I knew what they saw in me."

"This will sound like a contradiction, but what we saw was stable change," Bart said. "Muriel's is somewhat spectacular, I'll admit, but it's your steady, slower change that's the basis. Hers are the sparks of inspiration from someone that's never been told that they can't do that. Yours is the more stable progressive change that comes from rational thought and planning. Both were needed."

"Bart, are you through eating?" Muriel asked.

"Yes, why?"

"Because I'd like to take the discussion out to my patio. I think we've gone as far as we can with this part of the discussion. There's something else I'd like to discuss. Or discover. If you all don't mind."

Muriel didn't even have time to think about wanting an answer. Mata grabbed her and all four were suddenly on her patio. "OK, squirt. Out with it. I can feel it bouncing around in your mind like a BB in a tin can."

"Mata, can you make that flaming sword any time? Or only when you go full bore Angel mode."

Mata winced at the use of the 'A' word, but replied, "Any time," and promptly held it in her hands.

"OK, now, what do you feel? You feel heat. You see light, of course. But do you feel a pull on your power?"

"Yes, of course. It has to come from somewhere."

"Fire is heat and light. It was the symbol for a long time for energy. Power, if you will. The same thing that drives our shields and changing clothes and all the other things we do."

"Yes, so?" Bart said.

"So impatient," said Muriel, softly and with a smile. "Mata, can you show me how to make fire?"

Mata linked with her and passed the information. Muriel was quiet for a minute, then said, "Link with me. All of you. And look where I'm looking. See that plant, there? It's all

waste land that hasn't been developed yet. So I'm not worried about hurting someone. Except a few rattlesnakes, maybe, and we can always use a few less of them. Now watch."

What happened next was even more startling than her having redesigned shields when she was still being trained. A beam of white light seemed to pour from her eyes, or from between her eyes, and struck the plant causing it to explode.

"Heat, light, and energy. Only this time the light was coherent, and the heat came from its interference with the plant. And the energy came from me and the draw on the well of power I'm tapped into."

"What was that!" Bart asked, or demanded.

"A laser," Ted said. "A laser without any technical stuff to make it. And more powerful, if I don't miss my guess, than anything that's been created by humans before. A weapon."

"A weapon. And I'm not sure whether or not we should tell General Stuart about it," Muriel said.

"Mata, Bart, have either of you ever seen anything like this, before?" Ted asked. Both shook their heads, no. "Muriel, I think we should keep this quiet for the time being. We can't keep it off the net, the 'hive mind' that the Envoys have. They'll have all seen it and know what it means. But maybe we should keep it away from the humans until we figure out, oh, I don't know what. Muriel, what you've just done . . . it's more than just creating a laser, isn't it."

"Potentially, it's using energy to change anything. We use it when we translate between places. And a bit more when we translate Home. We use it when we create clothes out of nothing. Or pens, or passports, or logos. Anything. But since we have an unlimited source of power we don't think about it. We just do it. We don't even notice the draw on the power unless we go looking for it. But this. This has the potential for destruction on a much larger scale. It also has the potential for creation on a much larger scale," Muriel said. "And it scares me."

"Did you know it was possible?" Mata asked, softly.

"When I saw the sword, and felt the draw on you. The possibility was there. You were using symbols that you were used to. But there are newer, human symbols. And humans have known what fire actually was for a long time. Look at power plants, burning coal or oil to create electricity, and the fact that it all seems so inefficient. It is. It's using power to create power."

"You've got another idea brewing, Muriel," Mata said.

"Yes. When we create a shield, we create it, link it to power, then forget it. It exists on its own, then. It still does what we want, because we tie our 'signature' to it – create a link for commands to operate through. Much like a password to get into a computer."

“OK, so?”

“We even use that power for lights – well for electricity. That's the reason even if the whole state went black, we'd still have power, here. The same could be done for hospitals. The same could be done for cars – airplanes – boats. There're all sorts of positive uses that it could drive.”

Mata just looked at her. Then seemed to waver and closed her eyes. Bart grabbed her to keep her from falling, and Mark was immediately there.

“Shock, atypical. Muriel, you're doing it again, aren't you. And now you're picking on poor, defenseless Envoys,” Mark said.

“Oh, hush, Mark,” Mata said. “There's nothing defenseless about us. But she certainly has taken us by surprise. I just got overwhelmed by the direction she just showed us.”

“You mean the implications of using raw power to destroy a plant. Yes. I can see that.”

“No. Because she also saw that it could be used for common, everyday purposes. Non-destructive purposes. Much like electricity is dangerous, but can be used for everyday purposes,” Mata said. “And suddenly I felt like, oh, I don't know, like I was the student and she was the teacher.”

Mark turned and looked at Muriel. “Yes, Mark,” she said. “It's basic to what you do to heal people. I thought you knew. It's all through the training you gave us – that first aid course.”

“I never thought about it,” Mark said, quietly. “I just did it. It seemed natural!”

“Of course it did. To you. But not to a human, especially one still trying to understand the world and life and such,” Muriel said.

Mark looked down for a minute, then looked back up at Muriel. “We followed the discussion, you know. All the Envoys. The things you said. The implications of what you said. The connections you made. It was unreal, but it was all believable. You've just shown us something about ourselves that we never could have seen without you. And I don't think you can hide it. I'm not even sure you should. Disguise it, maybe. But not hide it. Enclave can put up power stations that don't pollute, and sell power to people at a fraction of what they pay, now. Oh, you'd have to charge them something, or they wouldn't buy it. We could bleed the idea of power healing across to the medical profession, and eliminate a lot of costly procedures and operations. We could”

“Yea, Mark. It's that big,” Mata said. “Now, don't YOU faint.”

“Not possible. Envoys don't have a blood supply to drop out of their heads,” he replied, and wavered.

Muriel caught him, and helped him to a lounge chair, while pushing some power at him. "OK, now?" she asked.

"I will be. Thanks. Mata, now I understand. Muriel, I apologize for every time I accused you of making people faint. NOW I understand. You have ways of surprising people in ways that leave them positively defenseless. Just the magnitude of your implications is staggering. And THAT'S what we need Ted for. His slow, steady change is the implementation of what you come up with. He's needed as a brake on what you conceive. Oh, not a brake on you. But what's put out into society. I'm just surprised that you don't make yourself faint."

"After all that," Ted said, "I think lunch is in order. Or at least a snack. We all need time to recharge."

Chapter 30

Results of Excesses (Thursday afternoon)

When they went back into Muriel's apartment the first thing she noticed was that her squad looked at her in a different way. A way, she thought, that she didn't like. They looked like they were in awe of her. And that scared her. She didn't want awe. She wanted friends she could goof with. People that would treat her as just her.

Mata picked up on it, and jumped on the squad. "Finger food and drinks. We need a recharge. Come on, I know you people were listening in. But that doesn't stop you from doing your jobs. My gosh. Anyone would think you were human." And that was enough. There were snickers and giggles and chuckles, and the squad went to work with a flourish. Miniature sausages, cheeses, crackers and various chips were on the table almost before they could sit down. Plates, napkins and drinks followed in short order. And, Mata was happy to see, places for the squad to join them. And they didn't ask, they just took places along with their leaders as if it was normal.

After a while, in which no one had said anything, Muriel asked, "Anyone ever hear a good scream? No? Well if someone doesn't start talking pretty soon, that's what you're going to hear. And I know how to amplify it, too."

"Ah, Muriel," Bart said. "You always know how to treat your guests. Loudly." This brought snickers from the squad.

"Well," she said, "it's better than not treating them at all. Chuck? What are you doing up here?"

"I figured you needed the best, after that," he said.

"So, where'd you get all this? I know I didn't have anything like this in stock."

"You will from now on. We were remiss in not having snack stuff for you. This came from one of the grocery stores in Enclave. Oh? You didn't know we had grocery stores? Yep. Four of them. We're that big. Two theaters, multi-screen, bowling alley, art galleries, museum. We even have three houses of worship for three different religions, for the resident employees that are here. You just don't get out much."

Mata looked at Muriel in horror. "We're keeping you from being a kid!" she exclaimed. By all means, you should get out more and see what Enclave has. Even your friends have managed to find their way around and into trouble. You should have the same options they have. And I bet they'd love to show you around."

"Yes," said Muriel, "and I bet they'd like to get me in trouble, too."

"Ah, well, nothing that we can't get you out of," said Mata. "After all, what are protectors for?"

"That's a good question, Mata. And one I'd like an answer to. But that will wait. I've ruffled your feathers enough for one day. And I do apologize for lighting a fire under you, earlier."

"Ted? Am I allowed to spank you child?" asked Mata.

"Well, If you can find her, and think you have just cause. Last I knew, she was dead."

"No, not that one, THIS one," Mata said, pointing to Muriel.

"Oh. Sorry, that one's not mine. I think her parents might object. Come to think of it, so might she. And I think you'd find the experience rather educational. Also painful."

"Mata, dear," Bart said. "Listen to Ted, will you please? Since we stopped fighting, we've gotten along rather well, and I'm beginning to like the arrangement. I certainly wouldn't want to be placed in the position of having to fight to protect you from a child."

Mata threw her hands up in the air. "The whole universe is against me!" she cried.

"That must be rather uncomfortable," Muriel said quietly. And the choked off chuckles from around the table that had been going on through this diatribe suddenly burst into outright laughter. "Poor Mata. I still love you, Mata. You're just overworked. Tell you what, when I go out on the town with my friends, YOU come along. The break will do you good."

"That depends on what I break," Mata growled.

"Seriously, Mata. Do you need some time away from me? Perhaps with Bart?" Muriel asked. "I promise I won't look. Hard." And she snickered. Mata just glared at her. Muriel quietly got up from her chair and went over to her and knelt by her chair. "Mata, I'm sorry. That was mean, and friends shouldn't be mean to each other. Will you forgive me?"

"You shouldn't be on you're knees to me, Muriel. I'm sorry. I'm grouchy, and I don't know why. Yes, I'll forgive you. Now, get up." Muriel did, slowly. Then leaned down and kissed Mata's forehead, and went back to her seat. Something was troubling Mata, and Muriel had no idea what it was. And her attempt to break the tension had bombed. Something was wrong. They broke up shortly after, with everyone but the squad going their separate ways.

"Chuck," Muriel said, "what's going on? What did I do wrong?"

"It's not you," Chuck said. "Well, it is and it isn't. You just dumped a load onto all the Envoys, and it'll take some time to accept it."

“But, what if I'm wrong?”

“Well, that's part of the reason that they need to think it out. If you're wrong, they'll tell you and show you how and where. But if you're right, then it changes the whole way that Envoys have looked at themselves. For some of them, that's hard,” Chuck said.

“You don't seem to have that problem,” Muriel replied.

“No, I don't, do I. Maybe because, to me, it really didn't matter. It doesn't change who I am, or what I'm doing. What it changes is the past, I guess. And I live now. The past is nice to look back at, to learn from, but it isn't who I am now.”

“Is there a way to 'suggest' that outlook to the others?” Muriel asked.

“I'm working on it. There're others like me, and we're all pushing it. Give it time. Oh, and if you want to visit that museum I suggest that you take an Envoy like me with you. One that it doesn't affect. You see, it isn't a museum of human things. It's a reminder of what we went through and what we lost. Come to think of it, it might help you understand what they're going through to see it.”

“Then by all means, I should see it,” Muriel said.

“How about now? Nothing else is going on right now, and I'm free,” Chuck said.

“OK. Lead on.”

Chuck gave Muriel the visual to the front entrance of the building, then they both translated. A look at the building showed that it was somewhat neglected compared to most buildings in Enclave. It wasn't that it was in disrepair or needed painting. It was much smaller things, like the windows showing signs that they needed to be washed, and the dirt and leaves accumulated on the sidewalk and particularly up against the building. The distinct lack of people inside also made her think that not too many people frequented the museum.

Chuck held the door for Muriel, and she found herself in a large room with exhibits that seemed to progress clockwise from the left of the entrance. As she went around the room, she noted almost religious elements to the exhibits.

“Chuck, have you been here, before?” she asked.

“Oh, several times. A friend of mine works here, and I stop by to help out sometimes,” he replied.

“Check me if I'm wrong. The first exhibit seemed to show an aggressive behavior, much like a bully. An 'I'm bigger than you are so you'll do what I say' type of attitude. As we moved along, it changed some to 'here's what I expect you to do' type of attitude, and that continued building. I don't think we're seeing the history of Envoys. I think we're seeing the progression of religions.”

Chuck stared at her for a minute, then went back to the first exhibit and studied it. Then the next, and the next until he was back up to her. He looked at her with some shock, then headed to the back of the building with some speed.

"Art! Arthur! Come out here," he said as he neared the back.

"Charles! I wasn't expecting you. Oh! Who's this?" Art said.

"This is Muriel. My boss. And she's noticed something that I think you should be aware of. She feels that this museum doesn't show what's happened to Envoys as much as it shows the progression of religions. And she's right, isn't she?"

"Well, yes, of course, but you can't separate religion from what happened to us and how it changed us," Art said.

"Explain," Muriel said. "All of the stuff here shows what the usurper did to humans here on earth, and not what it did to Envoys or how it affected them. Do you have anything that shows the development or degradation of Envoys over that period?"

"Well, no, of course not! Envoys were forced to fit into the pattern of belief that was established on earth," Art said, defensively.

"No, I don't think so. Envoys appeared, rarely, over the whole long period of the usurper, and always as messengers, except for a few occasional mythological or semi-mythological events. Your exhibits appear to imply that the Envoys were instrumental in making the changes, when in fact you show no proof that the Envoys were even involved. And what about the history before the usurper, or after Ted removed him?"

"Miss, I understand that you're human, and therefore can't understand the nuances involved in Envoy history" Art started.

"Bull. Art, I've seen pompous, overbearing know-it-alls before, and they all start with something to the effect that someone just can't understand the nuances. Every time I've heard it it's been a lie to bolster someone's inflated opinion of himself. Now, Envoys can't lie, and you're an Envoy. I expect honest answers from you," Muriel said.

"Miss, I'm going to have to ask you to leave. You obviously don't belong here in this refuge of Envoy history." Art said, drawing himself up. He might have wished that he hadn't.

"Refuge? More like refuse," Muriel said. And struck. Her mind locked onto that of the hapless Envoy, and bored its way in, discovering that Art had been a 'true believer' in the usurper, a worshiper without a choice, forced to the position by the usurper when he grabbed Home. To her impression it was like a slide control that ranged from free will to absolute obedience had been pegged and locked to the obedience side. She did a fast scan of Chuck and found the same slide, but it was set about midway, and not locked in. With a mental twist she unlocked the slide and moved it to the same position that Chuck's was. Then she slowly

removed herself, healing pathways that she'd gouged through Art's mind in going in. She set a shield around Art, not to confine but to support, then released the last of his mind.

A reclining chair appeared behind Art, catching him as he collapsed slowly. Chuck was immediately at his side, lending power and trying to help him balance himself. Muriel joined the effort, but it was still some minutes before Art appeared conscious again.

"It was a lie," Art whispered. "It was all a lie. What have I done?"

"Change history and change the world," Muriel said, with disgust. "Art, it wasn't your fault or your doing. You were simply made into a pawn. You're free of that now, and can make your own decisions."

"Art? Are you all right?" Chuck asked.

"No, I'll never be all right. This . . . the shame of how I've been used"

"Nonsense. Yes, you were used. But it was against your will, not something of your doing. If you're going to blame someone, blame the one that did it to you. You were NOT at fault. Remember that," Muriel said.

"Who ARE you?" Art asked.

"Art, this is Muriel. Co-leader of Home. She's human and alive, unlike Ted who is re-created alive. I don't know what she did, but I see the old Art that was always my friend. The one that's been away for centuries," Chuck said.

"How . . . how can I atone . . . ," he began.

"You can't," Muriel said, harshly. "You can't because it isn't yours to atone for. However, if you want to do something, you can correct what's been done. You were a historian, weren't you?"

"Yes," Art said. "I'd been cataloging the path that Envoys had taken since they first came into being. Then IT grabbed me, and forced me to forget all that went before him and record only his accomplishments."

"Did you actually forget? Or only have the memories blocked," Muriel asked.

"I . . . I don't know," he replied.

::MARK! CALEB! Do either of you know how to unblock Envoy memories?: Muriel sent. Both Envoys immediately appeared and went to Art.

"This will take time," Mark said. Caleb just nodded. "I think they're there, but we can't just try to force him to remember. It could cause changes in his memory. Caleb? Is this something that's affected all the Envoys?"

"I think so," Caleb responded. "I've worked mostly with humans, but I've seen what can happen with them with 'replaced' memories, where someone tried to force them to remember. Even those original memories can eventually be recovered, but it takes MUCH longer. Muriel only freed him to make his own choices. She didn't try to dig for the memories, which is good. I think we can work with him and get things back to normal for him."

"Are they still there? After all this time?" Muriel asked.

"I think so," Caleb said, and this time it was Mark's turn to nod. "Even that may take some time to sort out. Arthur," Caleb said, gently, "Arthur, we're going to take you someplace away from here, for a while, so you can regain yourself again."

"Take him to the clinic. We'll put him in a room, there, and see what we can find out. Go ahead, I'd like to talk to Muriel for a moment," Mark said.

As Caleb helped Art to his feet and translated him out, Mark turned to Muriel. "Before you ask, Mark, here's what I did and how I did it," and she sent him a condensed version of the proceeding.

"Oh! OK, you went in rough, used your own symbology OH! Then backed out slowly restoring the pathways and healing as you went," Mark said. "Very good. I'll check, but don't take that as a sign that you did something wrong. The way you backed out should have taken care of any damage you made going in. I'll just check it to be sure that everything is the way it's supposed to be. But, all in all, from the images you sent, I'd say you did a good job. A remarkable job. How did you know how to do that?"

"I don't know, for sure. I just did what seemed right. I think it was because of the link I've got with Mata. I know she and Caleb were close at one time. Maybe that was the source. Or maybe it's because she's a natural nurturer," Muriel said.

"Muriel, about Mata," Mark said, "If she hasn't pulled out of your mind, then she's still with you. Don't beat yourself up unless you have to. Sometimes it takes a bit of time for Envoys to recover from a major shock. Just be patient and don't blame yourself. At least, not right now. It could feed back into her."

"OK. Well, I suppose I should get back to my office and see what needs to be done," she said, sadly.

When she translated to her office it was to the street outside her doors. A great deal of activity seemed to be going on inside, and her actual office space seemed crowded. At least too crowded for her to translate into.

As she walked in, Mata stopped her. "Muriel, can I see you alone for a minute?"

Cold ice seemed to have invaded her stomach, but she said, "Sure. Let's go up to my apartment. Things seem to crowded for privacy down here."

When they got to Muriel's great room, she created another recliner beside hers, but facing back toward her. The she held her breath afraid of what she'd hear from the Envoy that had become a second mother to her.

"Muriel," Mata began, "I've been behaving badly. And toward you, at that. The one person I shouldn't mistreat. I'm sorry."

"It's alright, Mata. I messed up. I shouldn't have kidded you like that," she said.

"No, any other time I would have just laughed it off. You're kidding wasn't out of line with your normal behavior. In fact, it was a good quip. You had no reason to apologize to me. I was just . . . I don't know . . . floored by what you'd put together. You seem to see through things, differently than the way Envoys see them. And it was like the information was always there for us to see, and we were blind. It . . . it was like the whole universe was turned upside down, again. And I was falling off. I had nothing to grab hold of to keep me in it." Mata was rubbing her hands in a very human form of agitation.

"Mata, there's always me to grab hold of. Also the squads and all my friends and Ted and Bart. I'm sure there are a lot of others, too. That's what friends are for, is to be someone to hold onto when you're shook, and for you to hold onto when they're shook. That's what kept my friends together and hoping, all that time in school," Muriel said. "It's what friends do, is share." Muriel reached out and took Mata's hands.

"I think part of it may also have been that you're no longer JUST an Envoy. You've learned a bit about being human, and that's affected you," she said.

"Maybe. Maybe that's it. And you were a bit too close to the mark with your comment about Bart. I WOULD like to spend more time with him. It's not really a romantic thing, really. It's . . . oh, I don't know what to call it," Mata said.

"Neither do I, but I think I understand. In a limited sort of way. It's like what parents feel for their children, and close friends feel for each other," said Muriel, reflectively. "It's a sharing thing, a caring thing. I'm not sure there's even words for it. But if you've got that feeling for Bart, then I was really out of line with that zinger. I never would have said it if I'd known. It's one of those things that friends don't tread on, or at least shouldn't. So, I'll ask again, will you forgive me?"

"Oh, Muriel, there's nothing to forgive. You didn't know. Even I didn't know. Not until after, when I wondered why I'd acted the way I had."

"Do you need some time away, or something? What can I do to make it easier for you?" Muriel asked.

"Just accept me back. I'll get it figured out, someday," Mata said.

Chapter 31

Let the War Games Begin (Friday morning)

The next morning started earlier than usual. General Stuart's invitation to attend their demonstration was enough of a draw to have them all out of bed early. And, of course, true to anything touching on the military, they had hurried up just so they could wait.

Mata had resumed her position as Security Chief and mentor as if nothing had happened, with Muriel's help. She had every intention of going with Ted, Bart and Muriel, and had selected one of her 'adult' squads to accompany them. It just so happened that it was squad four, with Betty as the lead. That meant that the 'girls' outnumbered the 'boys' behind Muriel.

General Stuart had been kind enough to send a good visual of the gate to the bombing range, so when they, finally, did leave they translated directly there. The only problem was that apparently no one had informed the Air Police that they were coming.

"Halt. This is a military reservation. No civilians are allowed in this area," an Airman said.

"Airman, My name is Ted. I'm the Ambassador"

"I don't care who you say you are. No civilians means no civilians. So just turn around and leave, quietly, or I'll have to arrest you."

::Stuart, there seems to be a boggle, here,:: Ted sent.

"Airman! What do you think you're doing?" Stuart said as he translated in.

Without turning around, the Airman said, "Just following the commander's orders. These civilians were attempting to enter the area."

"Airman, what rank is your commander?"

"Colonel, of course, everybody knows that," the Airman replied.

"And what rank am I, Airman?" Stuart sounded either tired or disgusted. But the Airman finally turned around and looked.

"General, Sir! These civilians"

"I heard you the first time, Airman. Now get on the radio and get your replacement down here to relieve you. And send word to the Colonel that I'll see him immediately. It

should take him no more than ten minutes to get here. If it's eleven minutes I'll go to him, and my travel time is MUCH shorter. On second thought, Airman, cancel that last order. Just get your replacement here. I'LL bring your commander here, myself." And as he spoke, General Stuart translated the Colonel to the guard post.

"Colonel, I'd like you to meet some people. These are Ted and Muriel, Ambassadors from Home. They, and their security details, were specifically invited to attend these proceedings, and were on the list I sent you of those who were to be admitted. So, why were they stopped by your Airman supposedly by your orders?"

"Sir, they are foreign nationals. They can't be trusted with sensitive information like our abilities!"

"Colonel, you were given specific orders. There was no room for latitude in them, no room for interpretation, and no excuse for your flagrant violation of those orders. I know, because I wrote them. Now, I'm going to be kind. And offer you three options to choose from. You can tender your resignation, effective immediately. You can accept a demotion to second lieutenant and a transfer to some obscure base where you'll be less inclined to cause trouble. Or, you can face a general court martial for failure to follow orders involving Ambassadors of a friendly nation," Stuart said.

"But sir! They're foreign"

"I see. Court martial it is, then. Oh, and Muriel would you happen to have that little black booklet with you?" asked Stuart. Muriel silently handed over her American passport.

"Ever see one of these before?" Stuart went on. "It's a diplomatic passport issued by the U.S. Government to one Muriel White, citizen of America. I happen to know, and I've researched it thoroughly, that Ambassador Ted was an American citizen up until his death at the hands of a mugger on an American street. That such Americans have been chosen to lead Home, what you call a foreign nation, and represent it here, in America, is a signal honor to them and to us. And now I'm going to have to waste my time taking you to our local lock-up and holding you for trial."

"Sir, I respectfully request that you accept my resignation from the service, effective immediately," the Colonel said.

"Granted, mister. Remove your insignia and get your stuff off this base by the end of the day."

"But sir, how am I supposed to get back?"

"Walk. It'll do you good. It's only five miles. And no, you can't requisition military transportation."

"General Stuart," said Muriel, "I'd be happy to transport him if you could tell me where to put him. It would only take me a couple of seconds."

Stuart looked at her, then grinned. "Ambassador Muriel, that is an extremely generous offer. Very well, take him to Bachelor Officer's Quarters, if you'd be so kind." He sent her the visualization of the area in front of BOQ, and she and the former Colonel disappeared. Moments later she re-appeared in exactly the same position as she'd left. Stuart gathered up the assembled Envoys and Ambassadors, and translated them directly to the viewing area. An Air Policeman, there, gave them some curious looks, but said nothing. Good news, occasionally, travels as fast as bad news. Not that it mattered which it was. Muriel appeared to be bad news to anyone crossing her.

::Muriel,:: Mata sent, ::I don't like this position with respect to the actual range. I'm putting a bubble over the entire area with your squad. Oh! Bart just said the same thing, so it should be double strength of both squads. It'll let people walk in and out, but not anything that might try to kill us. Just keep your shield up::

::Yea, Mata, this whole thing seems a bit strange. Starting with the orders to the Air Police. Something's out of joint. I think I'll keep an eye out for low flying aircraft::

Stuart went into his spiel, talking about a new age in air warfare with defensive as well as aggressive abilities. Somewhere in his speech he mentioned that it was through the training and abilities of the Envoys of Home that this had been made possible. He also mentioned that these new techniques were effective against static, mobile and airborne opposition, and were available to any of the branches of service. That's when the shot rang out.

Suddenly, a clump of bushes off to the left rose up and struggled. Bits and pieces flew off until one could see that the struggling mass was actually a person, and that a sniper's rifle followed him. The end result was a man in a ghillie suit, standing in front of the viewing area.

"Well, a bit of unscheduled demonstration – someone want to retrieve that round for me, please – but it certainly shows that the new techniques work," Stuart said. "I'd also appreciate it if someone would collect the gentleman and the weapon and confine them somewhere where I can discuss his reasons for attempting to disrupt this demonstration." Three Air Police descended on the poor guy and took him and the weapon into custody.

The rest of the demonstration went off like an anticlimax. A parked junk truck was blown up by a single flying individual, without any machine around him. Then a towed junker was blown up the same way. Finally, a drone plane towed by a tow plane was destroyed. As a final demonstration, two rings were erected and two squads mounted the air for a fast and furious version of the game that Muriel and her friends had invented.

As the attendees broke up, several high ranking officers approached General Stuart and began asking him about possible application of the techniques in other branches. The only two things of note were the fact that the representative of the Army loudly maintained that the whole thing was a hoax, and charges had been placed in the targets beforehand, and set off remotely, and that the representative of the Coast Guard avoided the crush around the General and approached Ted, instead.

Ted didn't even wait. "Yes, there are applications to the Coast Guard. One person, without an aircraft or helicopter, can perform an individual rescue at sea, even in the face of a hurricane. If a platform of some sort is available to that person, he can perform first aid techniques that we teach that can even reduce life-threatening injuries. Instead of the expensive mixture of ships necessary to support aircraft and helicopters, any even small boat, manned by trained individuals, becomes its own major search and rescue platform. As for your other, less desirable functions as sea-borne police, one craft can outrun any smuggler and take it into custody. And as for being shot at, well, you saw what happened when a sniper tried to take out General Stuart. And if you're interested, then you need to talk to the young lady at my left who is head of training."

"Wow!" Muriel said. "Tell me, Ted, when do you breath?" Then, turning to the Coast Guard representative said, "All kidding aside, sir, we'd be happy to talk with anyone you send to us. If they're trainable, we can train them on the spot. It usually takes two to four days for training, and we provide everything needed. The 'battlefield first aid' course that Ted alluded to is delivered as a mental dump that unfolds over the course of a couple of days. I don't foresee any particular problem with training your people, and, of course, once they're trained they can pass the training on to others. There are certain perks that we reserve to ourselves, such as the issuance of Home passports," and she pulled hers out and displayed it, "simply because elements of it make it forgery proof. Oh, and should you elect to pass the training on, yourselves, we provide Envoys to monitor you until you feel comfortable with the role of trainer. Any questions?"

"Yes," the Captain said. "When can I start?"

"Whenever you want, when you can get about four days free," Muriel replied. "If you can do a week, we'll throw in some special techniques that we've developed, and you can see how they may apply to your organization. What we teach are the basic techniques. Individuals go on after that building on what we teach."

"You said, 'if they are trainable'. What did you mean?" the Captain asked.

"Not everyone is trainable. The initial test is to see if they can make a mental link, because all the training is handled and monitored by that link. Some people, because of secrets that they don't want people to know, block themselves from being able to make that link," Muriel said.

"How many at a time?"

"I've trained thirteen at once," Muriel said. "Someone I trained went and did fifteen. She just felt that she had to show me up," she said, with a grin. "Potentially, more are possible, but it takes a lot more trainers than we currently have to do that."

"My craft just went in for refitting and restocking. It's going to be out of commission for about two weeks, and my crew will be going on shore leave."

"Captain, can I make a suggestion?" Muriel asked. "First, let's see if you can make that mental link. If you can, then come back with us to Enclave and I'll train you. Monday, you can go back to your ship and ask the crew if they'd like to have the training. We won't force anyone to take it – people have to want it. It's going to make it much easier for you to suggest that they take this unorthodox training if they can see that you have it."

"OK," he said. "How do I do it?" Muriel went into her 'knock-knock' routine, and the Captain caught it on the first pass. A grim sort of grin passed across his face when he realized that he was now hearing Muriel in his head rather than his ears.

"Let me make a phone call," the Captain said. He turned and took out a cell phone. Minutes later, he came back and said, "My second knows where I am and where I'll be, my commander knows where I'll be, and we'll try it your way. Just let me know where to go, and I'll arrange transportation."

"No transportation necessary. We'll take you back with us. Any one here that you need to notify?"

"Nope," he replied. "We can't afford fancy things like security details. To be honest, they sent me out here simply because I was available and they really didn't expect anything earth-shaking to come out of this demonstration. But I saw that bullet hit something and just stop. I've seen that before, in that media report on a girl at school. And I've seen another media report where I saw a truck fly, then cars fly and park themselves. If I can get my crew to do things like that, then I can maybe show those higher up that we've got what it takes to do the job. Our current reputation isn't that good."

"I think we can help you and your reputation, Captain," Muriel said. Then she turned to Ted and asked, "You about done playing nice to the brass?"

"Yep. No nibbles. These men refuse to believe their eyes," Ted said.

"Well, I've not only got a nibble, but a bite, and he's going back with us," Muriel said. "So, whenever you're ready"

They translated to the street outside their offices, and the Captain's eyes bugged out. "Relax, Captain. That's just normal transportation for us. And it will be for you, too, before you leave," Muriel said. "Come on in my office, and we'll see what we can do for you."

The squad and Mata had already preceded her by enough that, as they approached the whoosh doors, they again performed their function of startling and impressing the unwary. Oh, and they also got out of the way, too. "Come in and sit down, Captain. I'll briefly go over what's about to happen. You'll get more in depth as we go along, so you don't have to memorize any of this. First thing we'll do is show you the difference between humans and Envoys, and tell you the reasons why. The next is to connect you to a power source that will always stay with you, and teach you how to shield. Those are done together, in that order and as quickly as possible in order to protect you from anything that might be hungry for power. Then you'll learn how to make your own uniforms and other clothing, plus some odds

and ends of stuff that will help, like never being without a weapon when you need one. Then you'll learn how to travel the way we just did. We call it translating, but names aren't really as important as how you do it. You'll make a number of solo trips around Enclave to be sure you've got the procedure correct, then one more trip to another dimension – the Home of the Envoys. And that's the basics. Once you've got them, they can be embellished, and we'll show you some of that before you go back to your ship. OK?”

“And you teach all this in just four days?” he asked.

“Well, actually, we teach it in one if we can. It took me two days, but I was the first trained and training methods and procedures were still new to everyone. Since then we've revised how we do things so they run smoother. It CAN take up to four days. That's what it took for my parents. By the way, I will NOT be teaching you how to make your own uniforms and clothing. I'll either borrow Ted or have a male Envoy do it. The reason is that for that part of it the first thing you have to do is undress. Neither one of us need that embarrassment,” Muriel said.

“So, when do we start?” the Captain asked.

“Oh, after lunch I think. That way Ted is more likely to be free, and I've got a couple of things that need doing right now, anyway,” Muriel replied, casually. “Speaking of which, Mata, could you come here for a moment?”

Mata moved from her desk to the entrance to Muriel's office. And stopped. “Zeb,” she said, with a shocked look on her face.

“Matthew,” the Captain replied, resignedly. “Well, I suppose it was too much to hope for.”

“Yea, it probably was. But you obviously weren't a 'baddie' trying to get training, and your cover checked out. I followed one particular thought back and saw your ship and crew. So, how long have you been masquerading?” Muriel asked.

The Captain's head snapped around and a shocked look came over his face. “YOU KNEW?”

“From the time you walked up to me and asked about the training. Oh, I don't mind training Envoys in their own techniques, but you must have a reason for wanting that training. The stripes? So you can openly use the techniques? Was that it?” Muriel asked. “Mata, come on in and sit down. This looks like it's going to be interesting.”

The Captain rubbed his face for a minute, then sat back and said, “Yea, the stripes. I've been at this for about forty years. Some in the crew have only been at it for about eighteen. We started out trying to do some of what Ted is doing, but earlier. Then got caught in the trap of if we did too much, made too many changes, then we'd blow our cover. I've spent years building that crew. A bunch of them are Envoys, now, and here you were operating in the most outlandish manner and offering training so others could do so, openly,

too. It was like someone handed us a gift. So, how did you know?"

"I told you. The first thing we do is show you the difference between Envoys and humans. We show new trainees their soul, then we show them an Envoy. An Envoy's soul is brighter, because they don't have bodies. Look at me. Look at my soul, then look at Mata's. Then, if you let me link to you, I'll show you what you look like to me."

The Captain, Zeb, looked at Muriel, then Mata, then back to Muriel. "OK," he said. "Show me." And Muriel pushed what she saw to him. "The waver. We tried hard to overcome that, but the more stressed or distracted we were, the worse it got. And you saw it?"

"We've had reason, recently, to take note of that waiver. Unlike the previous experience, yours wavered from gray to white, and was brighter than a normal human's. That told me that you were connected to power, and were one of the 'good guys'. I'm still new to this, so I tend to 'see' these things faster than Mata, sometimes. But she recognized you when she came in. And you recognized her as Matthew. And that confirmed it," Muriel said. "However, there were a couple of other things. You made a phone call, but never punched in the numbers, for example," she said with a grin.

"All those years of trying very hard to mimic the behavior of humans, and to be caught out by a twelve year old girl," he said, ruefully. "Oh, I'm not putting you or your abilities down. I'm simply commenting on my mistakes. So . . . OK, you caught me. What happens now?"

"Still want to take the training?" asked Muriel.

"Yes! If you'll let me. Obviously you have things that I don't know. And also obviously having the stripes can make a difference in how we're seen."

"What about the Envoys in your crew? Want to bring them in, now?" she asked.

"What? All of them? Now?"

"Why not. Oh, and do you eat? I mean do you enjoy it or do you simply mimic?" she asked.

"We eat. And yes, we all enjoy it."

"Then why don't you have them leave the ship in small groups or singly, and then translate here. Same place we translated to, the street facing my office. If you need to, go take a look at the area. Then we'll find a place to eat and discuss what you REALLY need to know and how we can go about doing it," she said.

Chapter 32

A New Type of Training (Friday afternoon)

::TED! Lunch. We're going to Sam's. Bring Bart. Oh, and there'll be about twenty five of us,:: Muriel sent.

::What? What brought all that on?:: he asked.

::Be there and find out, or be left out of the discussion,:: Muriel replied, demurely.

Sam's was a semi-exclusive restaurant that dealt mostly with business conferences and large groups of people. Usually by reservation only. Being Ambassadors DID make a difference, though, and one room was reserved for their use, exclusively. Muriel had been there once before, and knew that their food was good – at least according to human standards. It took the influx of twenty five people in the Ambassadors party as if it were commonplace. The one drawback to Sam's was that the menu was limited to what they had available at the time. Fortunately, today's fare was ribs. Nice, juicy, messy, flavorful ribs.

The party was ushered in by the manager, alerted ahead of their actual presence, who, by the way, was not named Sam. No one knew why he'd chosen that name for the establishment when it was created, but no one objected, either. He greeted each of the Coast Guard men and women by name – their actual name, not the one they used in their masquerade – which further agitated the Captain. Ted took one end of the table and Muriel the other. The captain elected to sit by Ted.

“She's dangerous,” Zeb said to a very bemused Ted. “You ought to keep her locked up for the safety of the whole human race!” And Ted laughed.

Muriel's reply was to simply 'put on' a panther head and paws, which drew laughter from the whole table.

“Holy SH . . . ,” Zeb started, only to be cut off by Ted.

“She's only twelve. And a lady. Which means she's more dangerous than most adult women and more inventive than anyone you'll meet. Also more flexible about her job,” Ted said. “Which brings us to why she DEMANDED my presence, here. You and your crew are all Envoys in masquerade, which is unusual, itself. But you also want the training that you already have. So, the purpose of this get together is simply to see how we can manipulate the training to suit your needs.”

Zeb just looked at Ted, with his mouth hanging open. Finally, he said, “You're as bad as she is!”

"It comes from being around her and associating with her over the past few weeks. I've had to speed up my thinking just to keep up with her. And sometimes that's a struggle, I'll tell you. But as for your training," Ted went on, "I think just checking what you know, teaching you the shortcuts and new embellishment and such should suffice. You're all obviously protectors, so that gives you the second stripe. And you can translate, so that gives you the third. Also obviously you can go to Home and back and are balanced, which gives you the fourth and fifth stripes. The real kicker is the first stripe, and I think we can take care of that this afternoon."

"And you say I'm fast," Muriel told Ted, with a grin. "You just blew through my entire training program and tossed it out as if it were nothing. However," she went on, "that's the way I see it, too. If we had a large enough pond, I'd say either bring the ship in or recreate it, to see how we could help them with that, too. Oh, and the air hockey thing."

"Air hockey?" asked Zeb. "We have that on the ship. Playing it in a high sea is . . . interesting. To say the least."

"Not the way we play it. We're talking about a form of hockey played in the air. Well, actually a combination of hockey and basketball, and three dimensional. Kinda a precursor to air combat, which is what General Stuart is working on with his people," Muriel said.

"Um, you don't need the ship, or, well, not exactly. We know it well enough that we can create the upper structure. But I'm not sure it would help much. We've been over it a number of times. There isn't anything that we can do to improve it," said one of the crew.

"Wanna bet?" said Muriel.

"Don't take that bet!" Ted said. "I've been fortunate enough to not have been offered that choice. I would have lost too many times," he said, and managed to look entirely put-upon.

"There are some tricks we can show you. First is about shielding. It's been simplified. Then there're records, flying, weapons capability, first aid where, if you can get to them alive and have enough time the patient can walk away whole. There's projectile-less projectiles, radar invisibility, and a few others. I think we can keep you busy over the weekend," Muriel said. "The only thing I don't know is whether or not you'd like rooms for the night. My squads rotate the duty, and use the down-time to let their subconscious work on any problems. Or, if you prefer, you can hang out with my squads, or even just see the sights in Enclave. Guest House has lots of rooms, and I've been in contact with the manager. He's agreed to open up the third floor for you and your men and women. That's something he's only ever done for overflow, before, and on a limited basis – a room at a time. But there's no one there, right now, and he'd be happy to have you stay there, protected from prying human eyes, so you could just be yourselves."

The Captain looked like he was in shock. Then shook himself, and looked to either side at his people. Though unheard, Ted and Muriel knew that a discussion was taking place. Finally, he said, "We'll take the rooms. One of the hardest parts of this masquerade has been

what to do with leave time. I think, if you don't mind, from now on we'll spend it here."

"By all means," said Ted. "You had the right before, if you'd only known. This place isn't restricted to humans, though it was set up to try to interface with them. And it's true that any trainees and graduates are welcome here whenever they want to come. So you're doubly welcome."

"There is a small matter of payment," Muriel said.

Before she could say what she was interrupted by one of the crew that said, "Watch it! Boss. She has that lean and hungry look on her face."

"No, nothing like that," Muriel laughed. "Besides, I'm naturally lean, and at my age I'm always hungry. Growing girl, you know. No, this is for the manager of Sam's. He likes to collect insignia, logos, things like that of groups that have come to this restaurant. It's not a demand, and he wouldn't ask. But it would be nice if you could offer him something that showed you were here."

"Captain? Coast Guard insignia and boat number?" asked the same crew member.

"That would probably work. Let's see what size he wants before we create it. One of you go look, and maybe ask him if you see him."

"On it, boss. Be right back." He was as good as his word. In minutes he was back with the manager who showed the Captain how large and indicated that it could be any way they wanted to make it. And the Captain did make it, on the spot, creating the Coast Guard Racing Stripe and emblem and adding their boat name and number under it on a white background made into a plaque that could be hung like a picture. He presented it to the manager with a flourish.

"There will be a separate room added on by the time you get back, complete with all the necessary furniture. This plaque will be over the door. The room will be reserved for you, exclusively any time you wish to return. And thank you," the manager managed to stutter out.

"Looks like you made a friend," Muriel said to the Captain. "That's got to be the most impressive plaque he's ever gotten from a group. And most of them just hang on the wall. Until now, this was the only exclusive room in the place. Now, since it looks like everyone is done, I think it's time for you to learn our type of shields, then get your new uniforms and your stripes if you want them."

Ted said, "Where are we going to do this?"

"How about right here?" Bart replied. "The ceiling is high enough. Just push the chairs back against the wall and raise the table. There'll be plenty of room, then." So, that's what they did.

Finding their power, since they already were connected, was simply a matter of looking

back along it. Muriel demonstrated, physically and mentally, how the shield was constructed and anchored to the universe – that change that made flying possible. Don obligingly popped in and tested the Envoys' new shields and passed them.

When he'd left, the group broke up into male and female sections and a curtain was drawn across the middle of the room. Muriel started with just one Envoy, realizing that what one knew and understood would immediately be passed to the others. She had one woman examine the uniform of another, then duplicate it on herself. Adjustments were made for proper fit and feel, and suddenly the entire side held nothing but perfect copies of the uniform. From that, changes were made to show rank and officer/enlisted status. The entire time for creating the uniforms was less than fifteen minutes.

The Captain suggested that, instead of creating suitcases to take their original uniforms back to the ship, that they simply each translate them to their lockers in the ship. A mad scramble occurred as they folded the uniforms up and sent them off. Then the curtain was removed, and they got to share their handiwork.

"Now, I'm not going to take you through all your various uniforms and civilian clothing," Muriel said. "You have the idea of how it's done, and I think you're probably capable of handling that for yourselves. One thing about uniforms and clothing that you make this way is that it will always fit, it will never get dirty or mussed looking, shoes will always be polished, and in general you'll always look as if you were just about to go on parade. By the way, you can do the same thing to your ship, as far as strengthening it and painting it. You could end up being the poster-boy for the Coast Guard."

::Ted, what about passports?: Muriel sent.

::Definitely. They're still in masquerade. They'll need them to back up the stripes.::

"OK," Muriel said, "the whole reason for your coming here was to be able to legitimately use your abilities in your masquerade job. So, here come the stripes. I want you to think of a gem or metal that you'd like to have for your fifth stripe," and she showed them how they were braided. "When you've all got your choices in mind, let me know."

The Captain looked at the members of the crew for a few minutes, mentally passing thoughts back and forth between them, then turned back to Muriel and said, "Tanzanite. All of us."

"WOW! I don't even know what it is," Ted said.

The Captain put up an image of it as a cut gem where everyone could see it. Then, next to it put up a Turks Head knot made from it, as if it were liquid. The deep blue with purple highlights seemed to glow with its own inner light. Then he showed what it would look like against the dark blue of the Coast Guard uniform. The effect was strikingly subtle. "Like that," he said.

Muriel held her arms up where she could see her wrists, and the Envoy Captain and

crew duplicated the move. The stripes were applied and she dropped her arms. She started to explain about the ability to move the stripes and change their visibility but was interrupted by the Captain and crew coming to attention and saluting her.

"Whoa, people," she said. "I'm only a civilian. You all did the work. Tomorrow and Sunday we'll go over some of the things we glossed over today in an effort to get you into your stripes. You'll find it a lot easier and a lot more fun than you've had, today. In the mean time, just tell the Envoy at the desk at Guest House who you are, and you'll get your access to the floor. You're also welcome to visit my office and talk with any of my friends and security detail."

"There is one thing we need to do," Ted said. "You each know what a 'no pocket' is. Look in yours for a little green booklet." They did, and found their passports, with the certificate inside declaring them Citizens of Home.

"We haven't actually been back since we started the masquerade. Even though we staggered entering it, we cut all ties to Home so that word wouldn't get out at the wrong time or in the wrong way. But I think now is the time to go back. There's something we can do to help all those people that Muriel saw massed up there. They need to know that they're respected by others that have been faced with the same things that they faced. I'll have to check with Caleb"

"Well, that's easily done," Caleb said, translating in next to Muriel. "And I think I know what you mean. Before you go, though, you need an upgrade to whatever level you were at before you left." He sent the new methods and information to the group as a dump, then said, "Let it settle a bit before you go. Once it's opened, it'll help protect you from what hit Muriel. Let me, or Mata, know when you feel ready to go, and either one of us can set it up for you. And Zeb, It's good to see you again. I thought you'd been lost to us."

"I know, and I'm sorry. But it had to be done. We couldn't risk someone acting out of character. We HAD to stay human the whole time. Having the stripes and a safe place to go will finally give us some respite. We don't have to hide as much because we're 'authorized' to use the techniques, now, and have the paperwork to prove it," the Captain said, holding up the passport. "The masquerade will stay in effect, but we'll be able to take a break away from it now and again. You have NO idea what a relief that is. I was beginning to feel like Vanderdecken." He gave an ironic smile. "So, OK, we'll see the sights, and go up later this afternoon. Time won't mean anything to them."

"You've also got to break it to the rest of your crew. I know this can't be all of them," Ted said.

"No, you're right. Less than a third of them, to be exact, though it's the top of the cake. We're only a medium endurance cutter, and hold about seventy five people. Speaking of which, are we allowed to train others?" the Captain asked.

"Yes, with some reservations," Ted said. "Obviously, if someone can't make the link, then they can't be trained. The other reservation isn't really onerous. Let us monitor each of

you that trains for a bit, to be sure you get everything in. You got a very rushed version of it. Let Mata or Muriel dump the standard training on you, sometime, then ask for help and we'll come. We'll need to see those that pass, anyway, to supply the passports."

"And," Muriel said, "we won't take anything away from you. It'll be YOUR training. We'll just make quiet suggestions, if necessary, and otherwise just act as your monitors for your troops, especially when it comes to translating, if you like."

"Sounds good. You're not saying 'no'. You're just saying that you want us to be sure, and to do it right. I can live with that," the Captain said. "Now, let's go do something good, like add a little something to the plaque the manager has." The 'little something' turned out to be a small section of the stripes across the bottom of the plaque, complete with the Tanzanite Turks Head. If the manager's grin had been any broader he would have been in danger of losing half his head.

On the way out of the restaurant, Mata suggested to Zeb that he hold off on his trip to Home. Her suggestion was that other things they'd be shown might seriously affect what they could say to the massed military, there. She wouldn't say what, just that they'd be able to hold out more hope to those who felt helpless and hopeless in the face of the grinding of the military machine on earth.

Don appeared by the Captain. "Sir, do you and your people like to play games?"

"Yea, we don't get much time to, though," the Captain replied.

"Well, I was wondering if you'd like to work off some of your lunch. There's this quiet, little game we play sometimes that you might like," Don said, with a grin. He took the crew to the field where there just happened to be the full complement of Muriel's friends. "Part of this is to show you what you can do with your brand new, squeaky clean shields. Part of it is to see if you can mesh minds with humans. You know, group think. We'll start off with just some warm-up, then us kids will show you how the game is played." He was still grinning, with that bright-eyed intense look of a kid about to pull a fast one.

And that's what happened. Twenty-one Envoys ringed around one twelve-year-old, trying to hit him – or at least his shield – with a ball, fifty feet in the air. The only restriction was that the ball had to end up going close enough to someone across the circle that they could catch it. If Don caught it and threw it, it didn't count as a hit. The ball had to stick to his shield. It started slowly enough, that most of the time Don was catching the ball and making goofy moves to throw it to another of the Coast Guard. Competitive behavior and an 'I'll get you yet' attitude soon sped the action up to where it was almost impossible to tell where Don would be at any given moment.

Finally, Don called a halt, and told the sailors to land and take a break. Muriel walked out on the field and took the ball from Don, and the rest of her friends took their places in the air. Muriel fired the ball straight up, then translated immediately to the sidelines, and the war was on. The initial 'fur-ball' broke with the ball moving in a generally goal wise direction, chased by members of both teams, jostling and body-checking each other trying to reach the

ball first. One ducked underneath, came up in front of the ball and sent it back toward the other end of the field. Back and forth the play went with both sides equally matched and no one able to score, though some came close.

After about fifteen minutes went by, Muriel whistled and retrieved the ball. Kids descended in some relief, some with arms around members of the opposite team, and all laughing and breathing a bit harder than usual. And the Coast Guard was dumbstruck. They thought they'd been fast trying to hit Don in the air. Now, they saw why they couldn't do it. The speed with which the kids played was astounding.

Muriel walked up beside the Captain and quietly said, "The Air Force was faster than them." Then she looked up at the Envoy and smiled sweetly.

"You, young lady, are diabolical," he said looking down and laughing. "You just challenged us to out-do the Air Force. All right. Challenge accepted, but it might take us a while to get there. Any chance I can get some pointers from your friends, or is it some sort of deep, dark secret?"

"No secret. What we call 'hive mind' or 'group mind'. Basically, it's where you are all aware of where the others are and what they are doing as well as what's right in front of you that needs to be done. That way, you're free to operate on your own, holler for help, or go help someone else as circumstances change. And you don't really think about it, it just happens," she replied.

"You know, there are times when we actually have to act like a military outfit – stopping smugglers and pirates, for example. What you described could really help us in dealing with some of them," he said.

"Yes, and being able to fly and use shields in various ways could even improve on that," Muriel replied. "Let me get some materials set up, and I think I can show you an application of shielding that might help you."

Chapter 33

The Ship That Didn't Sink (Friday afternoon)

::Chuck,:: Muriel sent, ::I need a large tub of water.::

::How big?::

::Oh, about ten feet in diameter, I think. Out back here. I'm going to float a ship in it,:: she replied.

::Oh, OK, then you only want it about three-quarters full, and salt water. Give me a couple of minutes,:: he sent back.

::Good. Frank, what's the chances of you building me a ship, about five feet long?::

::Depends on the ship. What are we talking about?::

::Coast Guard, Reliance class. It needs to be hollow, and I need to have some flammables in it. At least, after the first test, not immediately,:: she sent.

::Reliance class – medium endurance craft. Yea. I can do that. But tell Chuck to make that ten foot radius. If you're doing what I think you're doing, you might as well give it some space to do it in.::

::I heard that!:: Chuck sent back. ::Ten foot radius it is. Twenty foot diameter. Yep, that should do it.::

“Let's step over here,” Muriel said. “Oh, and you might want your crew to see this.”

“What are you up to, now?” Zeb asked.

“Trying to help save lives, and maybe missions in the process,” Muriel replied. The tank showed up, by the simple expedient of being a semi-transparent shield filled three-quarters of the way with water. Shortly after, a model of a Coast Guard ship appeared and settled in to its normal draft mark. It was complete with the 'racing strip' emblem of the Coast Guard, and the ship number that Zeb commanded. And Chuck added normal looking waves, in scale with the ship.

“Your people don't waste any time,” Zeb said.

“It comes from having to deal with an impossible child,” Muriel grinned back at him. “They've been competing with each other for speed and ability ever since I showed up and turned their lives upside down. Hi, Frank,” she added, as he showed up.

"Muriel, I think I know what you're trying to do, so I talked to Chuck about changing the water to reflect the difference in size between a two hundred ten foot ship and a five foot model. To better reflect the conditions that Zeb actually experiences. The ship is as close as I could come to the real one, but there are probably significant differences. Zeb, I hope you'll forgive those differences."

"No problem, Frank. I get it that this is just for a demonstration of something," Zeb said, "but I have absolutely NO idea of what that could be." By this time, his entire Envoy crew were gathered around the tank.

"Well," Muriel said, "how quickly can you act in an emergency? Frank, hole it below the waterline. Not a big hole."

"You minx. OK, so I slap a shield over the hole," Zeb said, and suited actions to words. The model, that had started to sink, held at the depth to which it had sunk. "Now, I get crew members to pump out the water."

"Um, Captain, why? If you make the shield right, then it stops water from coming in, but not from going out. Why not just push it out with another shield on the inside of the ship?" Zeb's second in charge did just that, and the ship righted itself at the proper draft.

"Can we do that with a real ship?" Zeb asked.

"I can't see why not. It's even possible, with our various techniques, to repair the damage so that it doesn't even show up," Muriel said.

Zeb stared at the ship model for a moment, then quietly said, "Why does it have to be damaged in the first place? Why not just build the shield into the skin? That would even save on painting. It's in dry-dock now, why not just go back some night and strengthen what we KNOW is weak, smooth the hull and paint it, then attach a shield to the outside. Might even improve our speed, due to less friction." He looked at Muriel and said, "How far can we go with this?"

"As far as you want, Captain. Theoretically, you could shield the entire ship like that, then put another one outside that that doesn't affect the water but keeps anything from getting closer than one foot away from the ship."

"That would protect my people in a fire-fight," he said, reflectively.

"So, where are you going to practice 'air-hockey' when you're at sea," Muriel said, innocently.

"Don't you play innocent with me, you crazy little girl. You KNOW how I'd do it! I'd . . . you really do know, don't you. Either above the ship or off to one side. Where the untrained members of the crew could see, and want to join in on the action. Meaning they'd have to be trained. Worse. You're asking questions that you already know the answers to, and making

me come up with the answers for myself. I can see why they tossed you into being co-leader of Home. It's the safest place for you. Otherwise, you'd have hordes of people after your scalp," Zeb said, glowered for a minute, then grinned. "OK, keep it up. You were talking about fire. What about it?"

"Simple. What does fire need?" asked Muriel.

"Fuel, heat, air," Zeb said. "Of course, take away any one of them and you have no fire. Or any two, for that matter. So creating a shield that smothers and cools the fuel, and the fire's out. Frank, would you be so kind?"

Suddenly a tiny alarm sounded from the ship, followed by the announcement, "Attention, fire in the engine room, fire detail to the engine room." Zeb looked at the ship, INTO the ship, and smothered and chilled the fire, and it was out.

"Like that," he said.

"Like that," Muriel agreed. "And it's something that any trained person, Envoy or human, can do. I think I've shown you enough, now. I think you've got the idea of some of the things you can use your training for. And, since I really don't know much about what you do, I'm afraid that you'll have to come up with the rest, yourselves. Just remember to think like a crazy twelve-year-old girl, and you'll do fine." The Captain busted out laughing at the last.

When he'd calmed down a bit, he said, "It's too bad that that model is so large. No place on our ship to put it."

"Muriel," Frank said, "Are you through with it, now?"

"Yea, I think so," she said. Frank lifted the ship model up and moved it out of the tank.

"FLY!" Zeb said. "We aren't limited to the maximum speed of the ship. We can do just that! Lift it up and fly it to where it's needed. Even in a storm. And we can provide a stable platform for any activity we need to do!"

"Here you go, Captain. I reduced it to one foot and added a plaque to mount it on. If you want any changes, let me know," Frank said. In the mean time, Chuck had removed the tank and water.

Zeb just looked at the model in his hands. "You really are something, you know. You have Envoys doing things they aren't supposed to be able to do. They're anticipating what you and the people around you want, and doing it. Without orders, simply because they know you want it. Do you have any idea how strange that is to someone like me, that came out of the old regime?"

"The ability was always there," Muriel said. "It just hadn't been made use of for so long that you forgot that you had it. Or, maybe, your people never needed to use it. Either way,

you had the capability, or else you wouldn't be able to do it now.”

“I see why Ted has you in charge of training. Even if you never trained another person, and like THAT'S going to happen, the attitude you have is what drives the others. You treat people with respect. I thought I'd have to put up with a lot of childish stuff. And there has been some, but I see the reason for it. And actually, you treat people more as adults than most adults do. And you command the same respect for yourself.”

“Well, there's other stuff we can teach you,” Muriel said. “Nothing quite as dramatic as you've seen today. But things that might help. And this frees you up to take that trip Home whenever you feel ready to. Because now, you can really give them hope. You can show them some of what you can do with the training to reduce the possibility of injury and death, both to your crew and to whoever you're dealing with. Whether rescue or pirates or smugglers, nobody needs to die, anymore.”

“Muriel,” Zeb said, “you've put us back in the business we're supposed to be in. Thank you.”

“Just remember to feed what you learn and come up with back into the Envoy pool of knowledge. That's YOUR price for getting the training. I don't think you'll find it to be too much.”

“No, not at all. I just hope I don't get cashiered out for having gone ahead and gotten the training,” Zeb said. “Well, my commander DID ask about it, and I said I'd see what I could find out. Of course, it did take me a bit to convince him to ask me to look into it,” he said with a smile. “Now, I think I'm just going to let all this settle in, and see where it takes me. I'm going to suggest the same to my people. Oh, can I get room service at the Guest House?”

“Yep. And if they don't have it – and I understand they have a good chef – then they can get it from one of the restaurants. No problem,” Muriel said.

When Zeb and his crew had left, Muriel went back to her office. Fran was sitting in her casual area waiting for her. “Muriel, what's it take to become a nurse?” she asked.

“Human or Envoy?” Muriel asked in return.

“Both.”

“Well, Envoy, you'd have to ask Mark. But I'd bet that it's a lot less divided from being a doctor than human nurses are. As for human nurses, let me look it up.” She went to her desk and typed in a search on the computer. In a minute she came back and said, “Two to Four years of college, plus some time in a hospital doing all the dirty jobs that are available. Oh, and during that time you'd be switched around from one area to another so you have a chance to see the various needs and skill sets. Emergency, surgical, geriatric, pediatric, general, things like that,” Muriel said.

“Oh.”

"Why don't you go ask Mark about what it's like for Envoy style nursing. I get the feeling that it's a lot less messy, and a lot more like just being with people. Giving them a chance to have fun, pushing them some to get up and around, socializing, stuff like that. But maybe that's just what I see. So, what brought this to your mind?" Muriel asked.

"That 'battlefield first aid' course he gave us. Yea, some of it's messy, but it cleans up pretty well. But that's one extreme. I was wondering what the rest would be like," Fran said. She still seemed down about something, but she didn't seem willing to share what it was.

"Hmm. Well, I know that Mark's been getting involved in psychiatry and psychology, some, too. And I know he has three nurses, or at least Envoys that act as nurses, at the clinic. They're not terribly busy, normally, and would probably be willing to help you find out what you want to know," Muriel finally said. "Fran, honey, is something wrong?"

And Fran broke down. Hands covering her face, elbows on her knees and silent sobs that shook her whole body. Muriel was immediately on her knees in front of her, trying to hold her. Then another pair of arms were around her and Fran – comforting, familiar arms and soothing voice that Muriel knew so well.

"Mom?"

"Shh, hon. It's all right. We're here. We're here for you, and we understand," and other comforting words for what seemed like a long time, but was actually only minutes. Finally, Fran seemed to come out of it, some. "Fran, hon," Muriel's mother said, "you're not alone. Part of what the training is about is that you never have to be alone again. We're here. Fred and I are both here to help. And we can. You've been through some big changes, and they don't understand. But we've been through them, too, and we do. You can stay with us for a while. It's all right. We can do this – we can set this up. Come on, hon. You've been in and out of our house since you were eight. You can stay in Muriel's room until this gets settled out." Slowly, coaxingly, Muriel's mother got the girl on her feet and translated her out.

"Dad?"

"It's not you, Muriel. It's nothing you did. Her parents are having trouble understanding how their daughter has grown and matured. How she's gained more confidence in herself, and they're resisting. Bobby came to us, yesterday, and warned us – asked what he could do to help. He came again a couple of minutes ago to tell us that it was all blowing up, and he didn't know what to do to help her. Your mother will work with Fran and get her settled down and understanding that it's not her fault. I'll work with her parents and try to help them understand. Yea, me, that couldn't understand my own daughter," he said, ironically. "But this is something that we can do. Once I got over the fact that you'd changed without really changing I did some talking with Mata and Mark and got my head straight. More, I found out how to help other kids parents going through the same sorts of things. So did your mother. Not all parents will go through this."

"But," Muriel said, "what about you and mom?"

"Oh, I think we're old enough to manage," he said with a grin. "It isn't like we've had NO experience in raising children. And it's time we came out of ourselves and looked around a bit, don't you think? Time for your mother and father to stop acting like kids on vacation and start acting like adults once in a while? Relax. Nothing's changed between us, you know. You're still our little girl that blossomed. Say, why don't you come to dinner, tonight, and maybe we can make Fran feel that she's just staying overnight with us, again, like she used to."

"OK. I'd like that. Just keep me clued in as to what to say and what to avoid," Muriel said.

"Oh, I think we can do that, now," he said. "Well, I'd better get back and act like the stupid male, and help out however I can."

"OK, dad. Thanks. And thank mom for helping out, for doing this." Her father translated out, and Muriel noticed a hovering presence at the entrance to her office.

"Bobby? What's up?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, Muriel. We weren't trying to keep anything from you. This just blew up. Apparently, last night she had a run-in with that dog down the street. They'd been for a walk and the dog charged them. She translated herself between the dog and her parents. The dog tried to bite her – well you know how successful that was apt to be, with her shield. Then she did something to the dog, mentally, so it wouldn't do it again, then went to the owner and told him off in spades. Told him if the dog got out again that she'd call the cops. Stuff like that," Bobby said. "Then, this morning, it all blew up on her. See, her parents didn't really accept that she had the ability to protect herself and them. Yea, they'd let her translate them for the party. But they'd never seen her use her shields, and never seen her take command and tell an adult off that way. It hit her father pretty hard. When she left to come here, this morning, he told her not to come back."

By this time, Bobby was nearly crying with frustration. "She never told us. Not until a few minutes ago. Then she came into your office, and I asked your parents what to do."

"Shh, hey, it's alright. You did right. If you didn't know then there was nothing that you could do. And you did what you could," Muriel said. "And thank you for getting them involved. They'll get this straightened out. Both with Fran and with her parents. You remember how it was with mine. And no, that's not why I'm staying in my apartment, now. I wasn't thrown out. Mom and dad just realized that I'd suddenly grown up to where I needed my own space. But I don't think Fran has reached that point, yet. She still needs parents, but they don't know what to do with her. My mom and dad will help them understand. All of them."

"You really think it will work out?"

"Yea. Her dad's got to be hurting, right now. It will have been a shock to him, to see her in action like that. Remember how my father reacted," Muriel said. "And isn't he a minister, or something? That could make it worse for him, thinking that she got her ability from something other than what he believes in. Bobby, you did everything you could. Everything right. Now, we just have to let things work out, help where we can, and wait when we have to."

"How can they?" Bobby asked.

"Well, I can think of two ways. One is that someone takes her dad to Home and lets him see the truth. The other . . . well, I really don't want to even consider it, in light of the way Envoys feel about the whole feathers thing. But it is a possibility," Muriel said.

"There's another way," Mata said. "One that doesn't involve feathers, but does involve fourteen Envoys. We've got at least that many that have talked with Fran, worked with her, been friends with her. And if fourteen Envoys can't put on a show, I don't know who can. Bobby, just about every member of Muriel's security detail is involved in finding a way to convince Fran's father that she's one of the good guys, and backed by good guys. We'll do whatever it takes to convince him. Even feathers, if it comes to that. And it may. We may have to use symbology that he understands."

Chapter 34

Envoys and Demons

(Saturday morning)

::Mata?: Zeb sent.

::It's set up for whenever you're ready. Are you sure?:

::Yea. They need to know that they're not the only ones. That even Envoys have faced what they've faced – have felt what they felt. And still kept going.:

::OK, well, you know where to go. I'd love to see a record of it when you get done.:

::You've got it, girl. You deserve that much. Just for my calling you Matthew,:: he sent with a grin.

The Captain and twenty members of his crew translated to judgment square, but not facing the empty lot. Instead, they had their backs to it – a line of twenty with one man in front facing the massed military dead as Muriel had faced them once before. Stripes glowed as the Coast Guard saluted that mass. Then, the uniforms changed. First to robes and wings, then to the Enclave gray dress uniforms, still with the stripes in evidence.

“Men . . . women . . . we have served for a number of years in masquerade trying to find a way to even get little pieces of the training introduced into the military. During those years we've fought beside some of you, and experienced what all of you have felt. We know. And we're here to tell you that what you did was good, if not for the reasons that you think,” the Captain said.

“Every time you protected a friend, and many of you did that at the cost of your lives, you showed that you were those that deserved respect. Every time you told the truth about what war was like you showed that you deserved respect. Every time you did what you felt was right, even in the face of conflicting orders, you showed that you were worthy of respect. And you have ours,” he continued.

“We are not human. We are Envoy pretending to be human and trying to make a difference, just as you tried to make a difference. Now, with the stripes we have, acknowledging the training that Enclave is offering anyone and everyone, we can make a bigger difference. But we can't do it alone. We need you. We need warriors that are willing to try to make a difference, just as Home needs those who know and understand the pain that you've felt in order to help newly released souls. So, you have a choice. Come back. Help us. Or stay and help the Envoys here that try to comfort those newly arrived. Both missions are purely voluntary. You have to make your own decisions,” the Captain added.

“But for us . . . we're going back. Some might say that it isn't our fight. But we're

making it our fight. And now, we have a chance to save more lives and help more people. Men . . . women . . . you already have our respect, and you have the knowledge that someone besides you knows what you've gone through. We can't hold the masquerade for much longer. Only a few years and we'll have exposed ourselves as not being human. We will have to leave earth before that point comes. But, hopefully, there will be enough humans to take up the challenge. Come back. Take the training and help us end wars forever," he concluded.

The Captain and crew switched back to Coast Guard uniforms, saluted again, and translated back to the street in front of Muriel's office. Mata was in front of the doors waiting for them, along with every off-duty member of Muriel's security detail and all of her friends except Fran.

Zeb gave Mata an ironic smile and a CD. "You did it?" Mata asked.

"Well, I hope I did. I gave them a purpose if they choose to accept it," he replied.

"And the crew?"

"From what I can feel, they all weathered it, fine. Caleb's new training works."

"Good," Mata said. "But we have a different crisis on our hands. One of Muriel's friends. She was told not to come back home by her father. It's torn her up a bit. Muriel's mother is with her, and Muriel's father is with her father, trying to sort it all out."

"Let me know if there's anything I can do to help, Mata."

"Oh, I think we've got it covered. Fran's protector is fuming, and threatening to take him Home to judgment square and leave him there. The only thing holding her back from that is that Fran would disown her," Mata said with a grim sort of smile.

"Then go and do what you need to do," Zeb said. "I'll take the crew and harass Ted's off duty squads for a change." And he and the crew walked over to Ted's office.

::Muriel? Any change?: Mata sent.

::No. She still won't wake up. Mom has her mother here, now, and Mark is talking about moving her to the clinic.::

::OK, what do you want me to do?:

::I don't know, right now. Dad's with her father, someplace. I think they're in Fran's dad's office. If Mark moves her, mom is talking about having dad bring him in. Can you hold the fort, there?:

::Of course,:: Mata replied. ::Zeb and his crew are harassing Ted's off duty squads. He WILL get as much information before he goes back as he can. Nothing else is expected. Oh,

Fran's dad is in one of those fundamentalist religions, isn't he?::

::Yea. The loud-mouthed ones that are calling Envoys demons, now::

::OK, I'm going to try to track back and see if I can find out which particular loud-mouth decided to 'enforce' this demon thing. It might be of use to us. Besides, that bunch is just another form of bully. They just use guilt and social pressure instead of physical force. So, keep me informed::

::I will, Mata. And thanks::

::Mark,:: Muriel sent. ::I'm not having any luck reaching her. She's literally blocked me out. Mom can still feel her – we know she's there, she just refuses to respond::

::OK, Muriel, I'm going to move her. Can your squads do what you suggested?::

::Yep. No problem. And I'll send to dad to bring her father in. By force, if necessary. Can I have a visual to send to dad?::

::Yes. Here,:: and Mark sent a visual of a larger than normal room with only a bed in it, turned down to receive a patient.

::That'll work,:: Muriel sent back. ::Thanks. Dad,:: Muriel shifted mental focus, ::we're moving her to the clinic. Here's the visual Mark just sent me. Be ready to grab him and bring him in::

::Got it, daughter. I'll be ready::

Mark translated in to Muriel's old room, making it crowded what with Muriel and her mother and Fran's mother already there. "Will she let you dress her?" he asked.

"Nope. Everything is locked down, tight. Maybe she knows something that we don't, because she's wearing a plain, white, opaque nightgown that's floor length. Her mother says that she's never worn anything like that, before," Muriel said. "Dad's primed, and so are my squad members. Her protector demanded the right to be a part of it, so we're only using thirteen of them plus her. You really think this will work?"

"Yea. I think that between the symbology and acting, and his natural inclination to start mouthing off, it might enrage her enough and shake him enough to get a reaction. The sooner this is out in the open the better. Keeping it locked up like this is not doing her any good. We need to create a confrontation, and this is the only way I can think of to do it."

"OK, mom, take Fran's mother to the clinic. You have the visual. Mark and I will be along with Fran in a minute. I'll tell dad when we transfer in." Muriel's and Fran's mother disappeared.

Mark picked the girl up, but instead of remaining motionless, Fran made a soft sound

and snuggled her head against his shoulder. "She knows!" Mark said. "She's just been waiting. And she's intending something, but I can't see what."

"Then let's go, and give her the chance," Muriel said, and they translated. ::Dad! Bring him,:: Muriel sent. ::Don't bother being gentle:: Mark took the girl to the bed as Muriel joined her mother.

"What is this! What demon's trick have you played on me," the voice of Fran's dad was unmistakable.

"Silence," Muriel said, quietly. "Open your eyes."

As she said that, Envoys in white versions of their dress uniforms walked out of the air, stepping down to floor level and over toward the bed. Two took up station on either side of the head of the bed. Two covered Fran with the sheet and blanket. Two more on each side took up station by each of her hands. Two more stood at her feet. Two, instead of walking down to the floor, walked up and hovered back to back over the top of the girl, rotating slowly to see in all directions. And two more followed them, standing in the air a little beyond the end of the bed. Fourteen Envoys, on guard, some facing in and some facing out, and all grim.

"This is outrageous! What kind of show are you trying to put on. I will not be swayed by this blasphemous performance. Do you hear me?" Fran's father was shouting.

"You were told to be still, old man," One of the last pair of Envoys turned and walked toward him. She began glowing as she came. "I was sent to protect your daughter," she said as she approached. "And I will be one of those that will take her Home if she dies."

By this time the eyes of all the Envoys were focused on the man. Muriel's dad had stepped away from him to let this play out. The massed Envoys began to glow, and the room became much lighter. Even the air began to sparkle with the energy they were putting off.

"I am her protector," the Envoy said, again. "What you might call a guardian." This brought a gasp from Fran's mother. "And I have failed in my duty to your daughter. I failed to protect her from the one thing that could hurt her the worst. You. You have called us demons, yet you have no idea of who and what we really are. You have simply parroted the lies of others who also have no idea and simply want to control large numbers of sheep and fleece them of their money. Well, behold," she said, and changed to adult size, then changed from the white uniform to a long white robe. And wings.

Suddenly, Fran's father realized that all the other Envoys had also changed at the same time, and the glow they put off almost hid the bed with his daughter. Fourteen pairs of eyes glowed out of the brightness. The two hovering over Fran held flaming swords ready to defend her.

NO! A matter of fact voice seemed to fill the entire room, without a source. **MINE!**

The voice said, tiredly, and there was a hint of movement from the bed. Covers slid down, and Fran lifted straight up, then rotated upright and floated from between the Envoys and over to her father. ***NOW, YOU WILL KNOW THE TRUTH!*** She said, and she sounded dejected. Both translated out of the room, one unwillingly.

Fran's protector looked stunned. "That was NOT supposed to happen. Oh, geez. She's taken him Home." And she switched back to her regular size and uniform and translated.

"OK, troops," Muriel said, in an effort to lighten up the situation, some. "Back to normal and go on back to the office." She turned to Fran's mother and said, "Envoy means messenger. And they are that. Not only the messengers, but the message. But there was an older word for them. And you've seen that, too. I almost feel sorry for your husband. Almost. Fran's taken him to Home. Specifically, that place that is the place of judgment. The square before the hill of the throne. Both the hill and the throne are gone, now, but the judgment remains. He will be forced to judge himself. Not by your daughter. Not by Fran, but by himself. There, he will not be able to deny the truth about himself. Or about his daughter – your daughter." She turned, and began walking away. Then stopped.

"Know this, that if things are too uncomfortable when she brings him back, that she will always have a place, here, to come to." Muriel turned and looked back at Fran's mother. "I tried to be her first protector. Without power. Without training. Sometimes without hope. Then I was trained, and I trained her and our other friends. And they each got protectors that could do a much better job. But no one can successfully stand between a child and her parents. So, when a child is so badly abused that they want to die, there's nothing anyone can do. Only the child, herself, can overcome it. But it will change the nature of the family. I'm sorry for that . . . not because I've caused the change, but because I pity anyone facing what your husband is now facing. A fully enraged child that has the power to utterly destroy him if she were so inclined."

"This will not end here," Muriel went on. "Those that have been spewing the garbage that your husband was parroting will shortly be brought to task for their part in it. Normally, I wouldn't interfere with a religion. I really don't care what people believe, as long as they do no harm to others in the process. But this has caused harm. Irreparable harm. So it's time for this to end, and people allowed to become free once again." And Muriel left.

"Come," Lily White said, quietly. "I'll take you back to the house. I don't think that Fran will return here. And I'm pretty sure that your husband won't."

"She wouldn't . . ."

"No. He'll live," Lily said, after they had translated to her kitchen. "But he'll be changed. No one stands in the place of judgment and remains unchanged. And those that find themselves there unwillingly are most apt to be changed dramatically. Muriel went through it. So did your daughter. Voluntarily. That's why they're considered Citizens of Home. They went there and back under their own power, because they wanted to. Fred and

I have also taken the trip. We know. We'll help as we can. Some will be up to you. Some up to him. I'll take Fran, at least until he's ready to welcome her back home. He threw her out, he has to be the one to ask her to come back.

::Mom, he's back,:: Muriel sent. ::She says that she dumped him back at his house.::

::I'm on it,:: Muriel's father said. ::Yea, he's in bad shape. He's crying. Lily, keep Fran's mother there for a few minutes. Something Caleb said, when he loaded that package on me . . . I might be able to help. I'll call Caleb for backup, first.::

::Thanks, dad,:: Muriel sent.

::No problem, daughter. Now, just don't joggle my elbow for a few minutes.::

And in her office, Muriel looked at Fran – a very subdued, heartbroken Fran. “He has to do two things before I'd even consider going back, Muriel. Can I claim asylum, here?” Fran asked.

“Yes, of course. You've got it, and it's recorded. Though you're young for it, you might even be able to sue for emancipation. We'll check with the lawyers,” Muriel said. “It was an out that they considered for me, until they realized that my parents were here, in Enclave, and maintained a room for me in their home. And that I was living apart because of my position with Enclave and not because of abuse from my parents. It's part of the reason I go back home to sleep every now and then. Either we can set you up with my parents as guardians of some sort, and you can stay there, or we'll set you up with a room in the Guest House.”

“I don't want to be a bother to your parents,” Fran said.

“Why don't you ask them, first, if it would be a bother?” Muriel shot back. “How many times over the past couple of years did you stay over at my house. Did they ever treat you as unwanted? Did they ever act like they were put-upon? They treated you the same way they treated me.”

“Muriel, WHY did this happen? I've tried so hard to make things work, to keep dad from blowing up like that. Why now?”

“You protected him. You used your training to get between your parents, and that dog, and dealt with the situation in such a way that the dog's owner was put on notice about his behavior. You acted like an adult, instead of a child needing protection. And he'd been primed, by those monsters that showed up the other day, to regard training as something demonic. You hurt his pride, and you rocked his 'holier than thou' peer group enforced beliefs. So, instead of thinking about what you'd done, he simply reacted. And tomorrow morning I'm going to do something really nasty.”

“What?” asked Fran.

“I'm going to visit the congregation of each of those monsters and tell them exactly

what their bigoted beliefs have done, and how it caused major abuse to a minor child. I might even have the miscreants arrested for willful conspiracy to commit a hate crime. That pushes the whole thing to federal level. At the very least, they will be called liars, in their own churches and from their own pulpit."

"Um . . . I think they all hold services at the same time. You'll never be able to do it."

"Sure I will, Fran. First, I'm not going to be nice and wait until the sermon to start in. Second, I don't have to be physically there. A projection and a 'forced entry' one way mental link so everyone can hear me. Third, I found out why judgment square causes human souls to judge themselves, and how to create the same effect. Those ministers and their congregations are going to go through a very rough self-examination. The same type of exam that your father experienced. And they aren't going to like what they see."

"Fran," Muriel said, changing the subject slightly, "those people chose to declare war on us by using your own father to attack us. Mata's been keeping me supplied with information and, come to find out, at least one of those monsters tried to slide a 'news article' into the media about a minister disowning his daughter because she was demon possessed. He even said that the reason you were possessed was because of us – Enclave and the Envoys – that we were of the devil and should be exterminated. That made it a direct attack on me, on Enclave and on Envoys, and they used you and your father as the point of focus to try to get this across to others."

"You've got to be kidding!"

"Nope," Muriel said. "They knew you went to school here, and presumed that you'd been trained, and that sometime that training would kick in. So they keyed your father to react the way he did. When he didn't throw you out immediately, they went to work on him by phone that night to 'show him the error of his ways'. That's custodial interference. Unfortunately, your father is susceptible to the type of guilt that they were throwing, and by morning he was in a full-blown lather to get you out of the house. You countered some of that by taking him to judgment square. So, now, he's going through everything he's been told and thought he knew. My dad's with him, and keeping him in the right direction. I expect that he'll show up, sometime, wanting to see you. He won't. He'll see me instead."

"What are you going to do, Muriel?" Fran asked.

"Just what you said. I'll tell him that he has to admit to the congregation that what he said was a lie. It'll mean the end of his ministry, I'm afraid. But that will end the immediate crisis. Dad will get him out of there and I'll go to work. And that congregation, and all the others WITH their monster ministers, will end up going through the same judgment that he went through. I expect that most of the congregation will only be mildly affected. Then your dad will have to apologize to you and ask you to come back. You don't have to, if you don't want to. You've asked for asylum, and that's enough to allow you to stay here, if you want to. It's YOUR choice. Not his. Not even your mother's. They're welcome to visit you here, if you allow it, individually or together. And under supervision if you wish. So, you have something to think about, yourself."

"You still haven't told me what you're going to do, Muriel."

"No, I haven't. Basically, I'm going to lay a guilt trip on all the congregations. One right out of their own religious beliefs. In fact, if the media is able to pick up the image of me and the thought as sound that I'll be using, then I'd like them to be a witness to the events. I don't want to keep putting out these fires like this. However, this may force a court action. I'm not sure of what the laws in this state are about hate crimes, and I'm not sure how the monsters will react after they've had some time to rationalize everything away."

"Well, you only have to ask," a familiar drawl said. "I even brought some help, because it goes to the federal level, too. How long can you hold them in that judgment?" asked Tex.

"About fifteen minutes, I think. Caleb says that that's about how long the square works on the newly dead," Muriel said.

"How does it affect those that have actually gone and stood on judgment square, voluntarily?" he asked.

"Minor glitches from recent stuff. It doesn't drag you back through the whole thing. I don't know exactly how it works, but it's like it trips the judgment thing, and the rest is done in the individual," she said. "So, it really isn't how long I can hold them in it, it's more like how long it takes them to go through it. I'd really hate to see what happens to those that try to rationalize it away after they go through it, though," Muriel added.

"Well," Tex's back-up, Henry said, "it will mean a court case, and you may be called to testify. I don't have enough trained people to cover all the ministers, so I've asked Tex and his boss to fill out the list with his. It's a state offense, too, so he can arrest them in his own right, then have us take over."

"Fran, honey, I'm afraid you may have to be called, too. We'll see if we can get the lawyers to agree to just a deposition from you, outlining what happened and you're being told not to come back."

"It's all right, Tex. I can do it," Fran said. "This society approved bullying has got to stop. I won't say I'm going to like it. But it has to be done. Once it's established in a court of law that religions aren't exempt from the charge of 'hate crime', then it should make it easier to end a lot of the other injustices done in the name of some god or other. It's outrageous what they've been doing. I'd call it barbaric, except that barbarians had a civilization, laws, culture and such. They were simply not the same as that of the Greeks, that called them 'outlanders' and looked down on them for not being Greek." These people . . . they're not civilized.

"Yea, well they made a major mistake. They tried to get at Enclave by using you as a victim. Even your father was a victim. And they tried to do it as a hate crime that was trying to hide behind religion and the first Amendment to the Constitution," Muriel said. "Before I'm done with them, that particular branch of a major religion is going to be missing. And ALL the

other religions are going to be shook up,” Muriel said. “A crime is a crime. No religion can hide criminal activity and survive.”

Chapter 35

Crime and Punishment (Sunday morning)

The rest of Saturday was spent setting up for what would happen Sunday morning. Muriel revisited Home to get a good, three dimensional image of judgment square fixed in her mind. While she was there, she also analyzed the keying that the square did, seeing just how it did it. It seemed to simply be a trigger that operated whenever a human reached the square, and caused the human to go into a self-examination mode. She examined herself and saw what the trigger affected, and made sure she knew how to trip the action.

In the mean time, Tex and Henry went and visited each of the churches to see where they would have to have people stationed. Envoys volunteered to help with the congregations, to temper some of the effect of a forced judgment, and to keep the ministers from escaping until they could be formally arrested. These were Envoys that normally worked with the new arrivals in Home, and were well practiced in dealing with the trauma.

Mata was busy hunting down the leaders of the religion and finding out whether they had a hand in the demonization of Fran, and by extension Muriel and Ted and all Envoys. The on duty squad was getting records of the individual ministers' sermons for the preceding weeks to show the progression of their attitude toward Envoys and those trained in Envoy techniques. One of the off duty squads had run a search on Fran's parents' phone and discovered that each of the other ministers in the area had called Fran's father, and the calls had ranged from fifteen minutes to two hours the night before he'd thrown Fran out.

Muriel, her friends and the rest of the squads had spent the afternoon helping Fran to understand that she was wanted, respected, and cherished. And that she had nothing to apologize to them for. They were there, and that's what friends were for.

Muriel's parents spent the time with Fran's parents. Caleb helped Fred, though he felt that not much help was needed since Fred had such a firm grasp of just what it was like to suddenly see that your child had abilities far beyond those of 'normal' human beings. Lily had a much easier time of it with Fran's mother.

Sunday morning found them all as prepared as they could be. Fran's father had come to the realization that he had been wrong in his assumptions concerning his daughter, and that he'd been led into those assumptions by people who simply wanted to control others and enrich themselves from them. So, his service started differently, with him confessing to the congregation what he had done and that he'd allowed himself to be influenced by those of ill will. As soon as he left the church it was Muriel's turn.

SILENCE! Her soft voice rang out in the several churches at once. Organs and choirs choked off in mid note, and all eyes were riveted on her image standing at the podiums. "You have been lied to. Your ministers have caused harm to an innocent young girl. They have

interfered with her parent in such a way that she was cast out from the family and called demon possessed. And you have blindly followed these evil people that have been the cause of such harm. Your religion is supposed to be one of peace and love. Yet these monsters that you've followed without question have advocated war and violence and hatred. They have been part of the machine that has manipulated political parties and lobbied for unjust laws that fostered their brand of perversion of your own holy scriptures.” Suddenly, the image of judgment square surrounded the entire congregation. “Now, you will understand the depth of your degradation, and your minister will know just how wrong he was. Now,” she said, tripping the judgment trigger, “you will judge yourselves and know the truth of his behavior and yours.” Her image winked out, and Envoys flooded the churches, each going to a member of the congregation. None went to the ministers.

In fifteen minutes it was all over. Members of the congregations left the churches singly and in pairs and families. Children were the least affected, but all of them had felt that weight of self judgment and were changed. Envoys followed them, silently and invisibly, making sure they made it home safely. The ministers, without the aid of the Envoys, were gathered up by Tex's and Henry's people, still locked in their own self judgment, and arrested on various charges that comprised the 'hate crime' that they'd committed.

The media, alerted by Muriel of the significance of what was about to go down, had managed to get cameras and microphones into some of the churches while the media people, themselves, stayed outside and unaffected. The images that Muriel had projected, and the sound of her voice had come through clearly, as had the aftermath of those facing judgment unprepared. In addition, they'd been primed with the information concerning Fran and her expulsion from her family, and that had been the lead-in to the scenes at the churches. Nothing had been sent out live. It was all scheduled for the prime-time news casts, and would be the lead feature in each of them, nationwide.

Fred and his analysis team were waiting for Muriel when she got back. “Advertising,” Fred said. “Advertising and that splinter political party that's been making fundamentalist noises, lately. That's where the next attack will happen. Television and radio will get threats of pulling major advertising unless they say, publicly, that the whole thing was a hoax. And that nasty little political party will denounce you and push for legislation.”

Ted had walked in right behind Muriel and heard what Fred said, and swore. “Fred,” he finally said, “do you know what advertising will be affected?”

“Yes,” Fred said, and handed him a list of major companies.

::Bart, have your team call these companies and tell them that if they allow their advertising to be pulled because of this broadcast, or even threaten to pull them that they'll be denounced as being in league with those that would attack children with their hate crimes,:: Ted sent. ::Then I want the financials of those companies searched for possible leads back to whoever is controlling them.::

“Mata, can you get your team working on who the kingpins of that party are? I want to go live, just before the broadcast with names and connections, and denounce them across

the country as being in league with those that would pull hate crimes against children. I want them put in such a bad light that they'll never again be able to try to affect politics in this country."

"Already got it," Mata replied. "And even may have the link between them and the churches. We found the heads of that religion, and half of them are high ranking members of that party."

"Names, Mata," another voice said. Henry pushed past Ted. "We want to roll them up, too. They knew about the attack on Fran, didn't they?"

"Not only knew and authorized it, but instigated it, Mata said. "Please don't ask how we got that information. You DON'T want to know, and it won't hold up in court. Here's the list of all the heads of that religion. The top six are the ones that were pushing for it, and the others went along with it."

"Ted," Henry said, "put a hold on the media release for a couple of hours. You'll be able to precede the broadcast with information that should shake this country as nothing else has." Then he left.

Bart walked in and handed him another list. "There's where the financials lead. Well, not just the financials, but emails and some social networking. By the way, the emails tell an interesting story. It would appear that this is the group that's funding the political party that you love so much. Emails to and from them abound over the past week. Also, one of the companies that you bought out is on the list of companies. We'd already called the advertising company and fired them because of their deceptive advertising. And we followed back the financials on it and may have hit pay dirt."

"How much of this can go to Henry and the FBI?" asked Ted.

"All of it, for the company we own. This was all done by 'legal' means with them." Bart replied. "However, with the others, not so much. So you might not want to let him know about them."

"Hmm. Maybe not, but that doesn't mean that we can't tell him the legal means we used with the company we own. I'm SURE he can find a way to 'requisition' their records and emails. And if he can't, then one of the other alphabet groups can," Ted replied.

"Well, be that as it may, we may have something else to look into," Bart said. "Something kept popping up on the accounts. It seems that the board president kept taking trips to Europe. In particular, one specific spot in Europe. And he doesn't own any property there, and none of his or his wife's interests are in that particular area of that country. It would appear, from a search of an on-line encyclopedia that one group of businessmen and politicians and such keeps meeting there."

Ted got an evil grin on his face. "Would any of the participants happen to also be governmental or banking?" he asked.

"Why, Ted, however did you know?" Bart replied, dryly, and handed Ted another list.

"Treasury?" Ted said.

Mata snatched the list out of Ted's hands, looked at it, and asked Bart, "Where?"

"Here's the address, and they should be meeting in about an hour." Bart replied.

Immediately, half of Muriel's squads disappeared. "Don't worry about them," Mata said. "They just felt like a European vacation all of a sudden. I'm sure they'll be back, shortly." And Mata's grin rivaled Ted's. "The only question I have is, 'do you want them to bring the principles back with them? Or just out them with the record of their meeting?' They can work it either way."

"Just bring the record back, Mata," Ted said. "And can your group, what's left, that is, happen to find the financial information on the participants? Particularly what banks they have accounts with?"

"These are what we've found so far," one of the on duty squad said. "We're looking for other links. They may have some blinds that we haven't spotted, yet."

"Excuse me," came a voice from behind them. "Ted, is there a chance that you could have someone show us around Enclave?"

Ted turned around and busted out laughing. "Mr. President, you've got the best person with you to show you around. Melanie probably knows more about Enclave than I do, now."

"Yes, well, that was the excuse I gave people for coming out here," the President said. "However, there is another reason that I think both you and I would like to keep private. My office has been getting all sorts of confusing phone calls this morning. Something about an illegal buyout of companies and an attack on a religion?"

"The buyouts were legal. They followed every rule of Wall Street to the letter, and the companies were taken private. They're no longer part of that machine. And the people that had been controlling them want them back. We're in the process of cleaning up their products and advertising, as well as the companies themselves. The companies will remain in business, just not the business that they had been in," Ted said.

"As for the attack on a religion, that's a bit backward. One of their ministers threw his daughter out of the house because she had Envoy training. He did so because he was heavily leaned on by other ministers of that denomination. That's a hate crime, both ways, but we're not charging the father, since he publicly recanted his behavior. His daughter took him Home, and he ended up going through the judgment as a result of it," Ted said, then shook his head. "They really shouldn't have tried to attack us through him or through religion at all. Their weakest point was judgment. And Muriel took that judgment to them this morning. Every congregation and minister found out what it was like, first hand. The

congregations were let go, but the ministers were arrested for custodial interference, harassment, child abuse, and a number of other charges. And the media record of it will be on the news, later.”

“Mr. President,” Muriel said, “the victim was one of my friends. And she nearly suicided because of the rejection by her father. That still hasn't been patched up, though my parents are working on it. We didn't know about any tension until she came to me and said that her father had told her not to come home. Religions, at least of that particular brand, are supposed to be about peace and love. Instead, it had been turned into the most vituperous, holier than thou, put down your neighbor type of organization there was. When they turned their acid on us and on her, calling her a demon among other things, and throwing her out of her own home, then it was too much. I brought the judgment to them. But the actual judging was done by themselves. I simply triggered it for them.”

“How?”

“Oh, instead of taking them to judgment square, I brought the square to them, or at least an image of it. The square is a deep link trigger that causes human souls to examine themselves. It's part of the balance that those of us that are trained maintain in ourselves. So, they had to face their own judgment, and it was harsher than anything another person could have done,” Muriel said. “They had to face themselves as they truly are, and that can be traumatic.”

“There were children in those congregations,” the President said. “Wouldn't that be too traumatic for them?”

“Depends on the child and their age, really,” Muriel said. “Younger children probably didn't feel a thing. Older ones, that had begun emulating their parents probably got a stronger dose of self-examination. But really, none of them got anything more than they would have if they'd died at that moment. In Home, ALL human souls go through it when they first arrive. Even children.”

“Sir,” Mata said, “I'm going to make a suggestion. All those that are calling for action against Envoys and Envoy training are ones you should look out for and look into. The chances are that they've got ties to particular groups that have reason to fear Home and the Envoys. Yes, this was a very high profile situation, and we may have made it even higher. But . . .,” she said, “but what's been going on in this country and in the world, though hidden, is an even higher profile situation. That's the target that you've been going after since even before you were elected as President.”

“Mr. President,” Ted said, “why don't you have Melanie show you around Enclave. And complete your training. Then you'd understand.”

Mata and Muriel took another look at the President, and started laughing. The President just looked embarrassed, and Melanie grinned. “I told you,” Melanie said. “I told you you couldn't hide it from them. Come on. I know some good restaurants, here. And you wanted to see how human employees are treated, here.”

“Well, I had to try,” the President said. “I couldn't just sit by and let people take potshots at me about the Envoys. Especially when I didn't know what was going on.”

“Sir,” Ted replied, “this whole thing blew up rather suddenly, but was probably prompted by our buying up the companies. That had to have hurt some financials. But this . . . this mess of harassing a child and abusing her like this . . . this couldn't stand as it was. We had to take action against them, and in a public way that would ruin any further attempts to use religion as a tool of tyranny. Muriel has shown remarkable restraint. She simply stated facts and used their own symbology against them. And caused them to judge themselves while still alive and on earth, giving them the opportunity to change their ways. It's not like she threw heavy armament, tanks and chain bombs at somebody. It's not like she tried to assassinate someone publicly with a sniper. Or any of the other things that have happened to her or those she's trained.”

“No, sir,” Ted went on. “This was an attack on a child, and by the very one that could have the worst affect on that child – her own father – fostered and ordered by tyrannical associates of his. This can't be allowed to continue. That religious group also has ties to a political splinter group that's been causing you pain, lately. And, come to find out, they're both being controlled by the same group that's most upset about our taking six companies that were funding them private. That shadow group is meeting, now, in Europe, and we hope to have sound and video of those proceedings, shortly. We have our own methods, and Home and Enclave are not subject to the same rules you are for gathering such information.”

“Go get the rest of your stripes, sir. Go visit the shops and see what they have to offer. Go visit a restaurant and find out what it has to offer. Come back in a couple of hours, and we should have information for you that will settle the problem for you once and for all,” he concluded.

“Yes. I suppose I should,” he replied, and he and Melanie walked back out of Muriel's office. Two steps into the street, they disappeared.

Chapter 36

Public Exposure (Sunday afternoon)

“On Friday morning a child was told by her father to leave and not come back. An underage child was cast out of her family. Fortunately for her she was a Citizen of Home as well as a Citizen of the United States of America. She had someplace to go, and friends to care for her. But it was still a tough thing to do to a child.” Cameras were riveted on Ted as he spoke.

“The girl's father was a minister of a particular sect of fundamentalists, and records show that he had numerous phone calls the night before from other ministers of that sect. A sect that, recently, has named Envoys as demons, and those with Envoy training as demon possessed. We don't have the actual conversations, but can only surmise that those calls were to encourage the father to take action against his daughter for her waywardness. That's custodial interference. The actions they proposed amounted to harassment and child abuse. What you will see in the following video is our response to such tyrannical behavior. It is hoped that the results of this action will serve to put on notice that religions are not exempt from the laws of the country concerning 'hate crimes'.”

The cameras faded out on Ted's grim face, and the video began with Fran's father's confession. And played out to the end, showing the arrest of the other ministers. Particular care was taken to show that Envoys went to comfort members of the congregations and care for unaffected children until their parents could recover. They also showed that the ministers had no such helpful Envoys. The video faded out and came back to the street in front of Muriel's office where Fran stood.

“I was hurt at first. Then I was depressed and suicidal. Then I was angry. I took my father to Home, to that place that's associated in many religions with final judgment. Well, the judgment isn't actually final, and it isn't done by some overpowering being, or even by someone outside oneself. Every human that goes to judgment square – and we all do, sooner or later – judges himself, and it's probably a harsher and more critical judgment than anyone else could cause to be effected on one. I went through it, myself, as a last stage in my training. And I did it voluntarily. My father had no such buffer. He went unwillingly and had to face himself with all the rationalizations and logic stripped away. No excuses.” Cameras, aimed at this quiet, twelve year old girl, took in enough around her to show that she stood alone and unafraid while speaking.

“It is time for this to end. It is time for religions to get out of politics. It is time for religions to stop abusing those both of and not of their faith. It is time for religions to stop causing harm. If you are a member of such a religion, be warned. You, too, will find yourselves on judgment square at the end of your life. You, too, will judge yourselves and find that all you believed and spouted to others was false – a lie, an abomination even to yourselves. You can save yourselves some pain. Look at yourselves – your actions,

behavior and beliefs – honestly and without excuses or rationalization. Do it now, while you're still alive and can do something about it. Because once you're dead and go Home, you won't have a chance to make changes and apologize for your behavior.” Fran turned and walked away from the cameras, and back into Muriel's office.

Muriel met her there, and hugged her, then took her to her casual area. “Now I know how you felt, Muriel,” Fran said. “Every time you made a target of yourself. How do you stand it?”

“I stand it because I know I'm meaner than they are, and nastier, and that it's the other guy that's going to be hurting. And I don't give up,” Muriel said.

“If dad goes to jail, what happens to mom? And me?” Fran asked.

“Bring her in. We can put her up, here, much like we did with my parents. And if your dad manages to avoid jail, and you wish, you could bring him in, too.”

“I don't think I'm ready for that, yet,” Fran said.

“Then stay with my parents. At least until you figure out what you want to do,” Muriel replied. “They'll be happy to have you with them. And they'll keep you in touch with what's going on, and let your mother see you whenever you want and she wants.”

And on the television: *“Breaking news. Members of a splinter group political party have been arrested for fostering the Demon Envoy propaganda that's been used in television and radio spots and newspaper ads. Representatives of the FBI wouldn't comment on the charges lodged against them, but insiders suggest that they were the ones that prompted a religious sect to so over reach itself as to cause the abuse and breakup of a family. Also, several companies have suddenly pulled their advertisements from the airways in protest of the arrest of the ministers of that religious sect.”*

“Go on, Fran. You don't need to stay here with this mayhem going on,” Muriel said. Fran just nodded, sadly, and translated out.

“In news from Washington, a prominent legal firm and lobbyist group in both New York and Washington has been raided by Federal agents. Acting on an unknown tip, the agents cut all power and utilities to the two offices then entered and arrested everyone. The agents refused to speak about the case citing that it was an ongoing investigation. Sources indicate that, after the agents left, there was absolutely nothing left in the offices, not even the desks and chairs. The firm, famous for some high profile cases, is less known for its lobbying work regarding copyright and patent law, banking regulation, legal status of corporations and equipment contracts for the military.”

“So . . . they rolled up that law firm,” Melanie said as she and the President walked into Muriel's office.

“Yep. Looks that way,” Muriel replied. “How'd it go?”

"Oh, no problem. And no problem with his balance, either. He's a bit shook, but he should come out of that in a half hour or so," Melanie said. "Dad was there, of course, along with some of the people from the military and friends and relatives that had died. I think what's gotten to him was awe rather than anything in his judgment."

"You two DO know that I'm right here and can answer for myself, don't you?" the President asked.

"Of course we do," Muriel said. "That's why we're talking about you. Can't let famous or important people speak for themselves. They might actually tell you something you want to hear. By accident, of course," she added, grinning. "Why don't you sit down and relax. Would you like something to eat or drink?"

"Coffee, if I could. I hear from the FBI that you have the best coffee in the world," he replied.

"We do, but it might be considered an import. We get it from Home. It's made there," Muriel said, as one of her squad brought in a coffee service for three.

"Aren't you a little young?" Melanie asked.

"Not any more. Of course, I had to sneak the first cup in. But really, there's less sugar and caffeine in coffee than there is in soda. And I don't get that much. Unlike Ted that goes through a quart of it a day," Muriel replied. "Melanie, how would we go about getting deputized, or whatever, as part of the Secret Service?"

"Oh, oh. What did you do now?"

"Well, you might say that we're doing some clandestine work in a foreign country with regard to ongoing investigations that are happening in this country," Muriel dodged.

"Uh, huh. And you just happen to be using foreign nationals for the clandestine work."

"Well . . . yes, of course," Muriel replied.

"Uh, huh. And do they need a cover?"

"Oh! No, they've got their clothes on."

"You goof," Melanie said. "Seriously, we can't give them a cover identity or anything like that. I'm afraid they'd be on their own with regard to foreign nations and their laws. But if you get any good information and turned it over to us . . . well . . . I'm sure that we could find some way to use it to good advantage."

"Oh, good," Mata said, coming into Muriel's casual area. "Then here's the first two hours, from ten different points of view. We should have more, later," she said, as she set ten

disks on the coffee table. A laptop computer joined them and a disk was inserted.

The President watched, along with Melanie, for about fifteen minutes. Watched and heard. And he appeared to be getting angrier and angrier as the meeting went on. Finally, he said, "I want them all rolled up and brought in for questioning. And I don't mean questioning with a lawyer present, and I don't mean legal means of bringing them in," he said with some vehemence. "These people are talking about the destruction of the country – of all the European countries, too – and the creation of a world dictatorship."

"Mr. President, sir, I'm not going to say, 'we have to go slowly'," Melanie said. "Obviously, that wouldn't be good for anyone but them. But we do have to find a legal way to take them down. One way would be to leak some of this to the country where they're holding the meeting. IF we can trust that that country isn't completely dominated by these people."

"We can't trust any country," the President said.

"There's one we can trust," Melanie said, softly. "But they'd have to be authorized to act for us."

"Out with it, Melanie."

"Home could act on our behalf. And they're trustworthy. You know that, now, in a way that most people wouldn't understand without going through the judgment," Melanie replied. "But it would take an extraordinary action to allow it. And where would we take them to to question them?"

Ted walked in as Melanie was speaking. "Sir, you'd have to declare the meeting to be a Clear and Present Danger to the country, as an executive action and request the help of Home in apprehending them. And the only place I can think of to take them would be Home. If we bring them here, word could leak out and someone might try to storm us. Take them Home and they'd simply disappear."

"You're talking about leaving them there when we're through questioning them," the President said.

"Yes, sir, I am. I can't think of any good way – or any good reason – to bring them back. And, once they've faced their judgment, I doubt that they'd be able to be considered sane. Bringing them back for trial would simply give some law firm an opportunity to try to take action against you, against us, and effect the actions they propose even faster," Ted said.

"Muriel? You're being awfully quiet," the President said.

"We haven't heard all that they are proposing in this meeting," Muriel said. "Nor do we have all the threads of this conspiracy against the country and the world. We've shaken them up on a number of fronts, and there could be an attack coming from a direction we don't even expect or know about. Envoys, or anyone trained in the techniques, can pick them up any time. I think it's too soon to spring the trap. It would simply point to us as being the ones

doing it, and remove the element of surprise.”

“So, you're saying that we have to do this legally?” the President asked.

“I'm saying that we have to appear to be doing this legally. The 'Clear and Present Danger' can be used as the trigger for the action. But we need to be able to track every point of evidence, every reduction of peoples personal liberties, such as surveillance and wire tapping, and whatever. Melanie would know that side of it better than I. Or Henry or Adam would,” Muriel said. “Move too fast, and you may leave enough of the Hydra out there, still alive and active but with more knowledge about what we know. They'd simply rebuild and do it again, and we wouldn't even know it was happening.”

“So, you're saying to let them go?” he asked.

“I'm saying get the rest of the meeting. See what their next moves are, and find a way to block or delay them. And in the mean time, watch them. Tap their phones, their emails and social networking, their correspondence. See who else they are in contact with, and in what way,” Muriel said. “In the mean time, do some housecleaning. Find out who is actually honest in your cabinet and in the various departments. Find ways to move the dishonest ones out and replace them. For instance, is Homeland Security clean? You know Treasury isn't. What about the heads of the military. What about the Attorney General?”

“Ted?”

“I see where she's going with this. And I think she's right. If they just disappear, then others might take up the task,” Ted said. “There have already been questions about Homeland Security and whether it's actually doing it's job after that CIA fiasco. Dissolve it and put Secret Service in charge of the coordination. Then start getting people inside the various security areas trained. Those that can't or won't be trained are either moved sideways to areas where they can't do any damage or are fired.”

“I can see one possible problem,” Muriel said. “You could get resistance to people getting the training from the standpoint of relying too heavily on one 'foreign national technology' in establishing qualifications for a position. Others might think that taking the training was some sort of 'loyalty oath' thing. And in a sense it is. The ultimate one. It's not an oath to you or to any country – even Home. It's an oath to self to remain balanced.”

“Melanie?”

“Take out Homeland Security first. We've already gotten feelers from them about our actions, saying that some of them weren't necessary or were irresponsible or something. Call her in, offer her the training. If she refuses, fire her and dissolve the department. Same with the AG., but find an honest lawyer to take the position. Congress might be the stumbling block, there, but I think if you went to the heads of House and Senate and told them point blank that it was time to declare themselves or something, you might be able to put it across.”

“One other thing,” Muriel said. “Check your office staff, too. You may have leaks you

don't even know about. I hate to say it, but it could be people that you've had around you for a long time that are leaking information about upcoming actions, and preparing the opposition to counter them. We can flood your office with trainers and have them all trained in a couple of days, at worst. Then work from there to Homeland Security and the AG. Sir, you're going to have to be ruthless in culling people out."

The President looked at her, grimly, for a minute. Then said, "Muriel, you're a citizen of the United States. An Ambassador for the United States. And you're trained and know how to train others and detect when they are up to no good. I'm going to call on you to come in and do the training, starting with my Chief of Staff. If I used Melanie, then it might be considered favoritism of one form or another."

"It still might be considered favoritism," Muriel replied. "I'm the leader of a foreign nation."

"Well, you'd have to give that up, of course," the President said.

"Sir, with all due respect, I decline," Muriel replied. "Being leader of Home isn't something I do, it's something I am. As it's been explained to me by Mata, Ted, and others, just the fact of my existence and training makes me a co-leader of Home. There's no way I can give it up without dying. I'll come in and train, if you like. But Enclave is now my home because events caused both me and my parents to have to retreat here. And I can't undo having gone to Home any more than you can. So, with regard to bringing me in as the trainer, or lead trainer, or whatever, all I can say is 'find a way'."

"Ted?"

"Don't get me into this, sir. She's right. It's been a joke around here that if she ever left every Envoy would go with her and leave me to have to do my own cooking."

The President smiled, tiredly. "Melanie?"

"They're right, sir. And so are you, that I can't be the one training them. So, your options are to have Muriel do or supervise the training, or have the Envoys, themselves, do the training. And I don't think that would go over well at all. People might accept Envoys doing the training under supervision of an American citizen. But not without that supervision," Melanie said. The President sat back, rubbed his face with his hands, and looked like he was thinking deeply.

"Sir, if I may . . . there may be a way to pull the hat out of the rabbit," Muriel said. He looked up at her, questioningly. "You've come out here, at our invitation. Visited here and visited Home. You've met with the leaders of Home. So, now you return the favor and invite us, or at least me, to visit Washington and your office. And, after some time in meeting, you ask your Chief of Staff to come in. Then you suggest the training to him. And we go from there."

"Pull the hat out of the rabbit, huh?" asked the President. Mata quickly swallowed and

quietly set her glass aside. "How do you manage that one?"

"Oh," Muriel replied, "anyone can pull a rabbit out of a hat. It takes real skill to pull a hat out of a rabbit." And she reached out toward Ted and calmly pulled a top hat out of him. And Mata was VERY glad she'd put down the glass. The President roared with laughter. Ted just looked pained.

"So, how do we do this?" the President asked, when he'd calmed down.

"Well, the easiest way is for us to go back with you. I'll have to take a squad. My Security Chief would insist on it. But since they're all Envoys, and I believe one squad of Envoys that look like kids is still here, I can't see that as a problem for your uniformed officers. Particularly if Melanie vouches for them," Muriel said.

"Melanie?"

"They're fine with me. I KNOW they're Envoys, and you would too, if you looked at their souls. And if uniforms want to argue with me, they may need to be replaced," she said.

"I'll stay here, Muriel," Mata said. "We've still got information coming in, and I want to be here when the two squads come back. I think I can trust you to behave in an appropriate manner. In other words, like yourself," she said, and grinned.

"OK. Ted, are you going with us?"

"Nope," he replied. "This is your circus."

::Squad. Out front, Class A uniforms:: "Mr. President, Melanie, my squad's out front. Shall we join them and make like an invading army?" And the President laughed again, stood up and went out, followed by Melanie. The eight of them left seconds later.

Chapter 37

Presidential Meeting (Late Sunday afternoon)

They came out ahead of a security barrier. Uniformed Secret Service officers ringed the area and manned the barrier. Three of them started to draw weapons, and found themselves immediately stopped by what looked like three children.

"Gentlemen, you know who I am," Melanie said.

"But, ma'am, these people"

"Did I tell you to speak? Did I tell you to question my orders? Do you even remember what my orders were?"

"But"

"That's enough, troop. You're relieved. Turn in your badge and gun. You don't have the intelligence to hold down this assignment," Melanie said. "Now, how about the rest of you?"

"Ma'am, you startled us. If you'd direct this young lady to let go of my wrist, I'd be more than happy to holster my weapon," one of them said.

Melanie looked at the other. "Ma'am, I apologize. I reacted to movement and mass. I stopped when I recognized you."

"Melanie," the 'boy' holding his wrist said, "he never cleared the holster, and had stopped before I got to him. I'm not even really holding his wrist. Just got it encircled."

"Very well. I won't fault reactions. Only stupidity. Holster your weapons and I'll introduce you. And you," Melanie said to the first, "I gave you a direct order. You were told to turn in your weapon and badge, but you're still here." Muriel motioned to her squad members to return to their places.

"Ma'am, I don't take no orders from BEM lovers," he said.

Melanie immediately switched to Marine blues, and held a .45 in two handed stance pointed at the man's head. "BEM, huh? I haven't heard that term in years. Now, just slowly put your gun and badge on the floor. The President really doesn't like it if I turn a wall into a Jackson Pollock painting made out of blood and brains."

Slowly, the ex-officer placed the gun and badge on the floor. As he stood up, though, he made as if to bring the gun with him. However, it seemed to be stuck to the floor.

"That your doing, Muriel?" asked Melanie.

"Yep. I can put him there, too, if you like."

"Naw, I'll just have one of the others cuff him while I call in one of my squad to take him back for questioning." Grant, one of her detail members, arrived just as the man was cuffed, and translated him out of the area. Melanie walked over to the officer that had used his cuffs, and supplied him with another set.

"This'll leave you short, ma'am."

"No, it won't," Melanie said. "Someone once called me the reason the riot stopped. So I thought I'd better be prepared. I can call up about five hundred of these at a time, if I wanted to. But I probably wouldn't. Just, maybe ten or fifteen at a time. That's all I've been able to apply at one time."

"Geez! Where can I learn to do that?"

"See that little girl, over there, with the decoration on her epaulettes? Ask her. She trained me. That's Ambassador Muriel. She's in charge of training in Envoy techniques, and her being here is because of that. Get with me, later, at the office, and I'll tell you all about it."

The assembled group moved on past the barriers toward the President's office. As they approached, two Marines came to attention.

"Ma'am," said one.

"Corporal," she replied.

"You were a Marine?"

"Yes, corporal," she replied.

"Would it be permissible for another Marine to take the training, ma'am?"

"I don't see why not. Talk to your CO about it. Have him call me if he has any questions. There's already two military outfits that have training," Melanie said.

"Three," Muriel said. "Coast Guard has about a third of one ship trained, and I expect most, if not all, will be, soon."

"Oh, corporal, this is Ambassador Muriel, from the Envoy Enclave. She's in charge of training in Envoy techniques. Have your CO contact her if he'd rather. She can give you the same details that I can. Or just find a way to get out there on leave, and, if you pass the first test, you'll come back trained."

"Thank you, ma'am. I'll see what I can do through my CO, first."

"As you were," Melanie barked, softly, as she passed the guards and followed the President into his office.

"Well," the President said, "I'm afraid that I can't offer you the same quality coffee that you gave me at Enclave, but you're quite welcome to have some of what we have. Or anything else that we can come up with."

"Well, actually," Muriel said, pulling out two bags from a 'no pocket' and placing them on the coffee table, "you're welcome to try a sample, and if you like it we can provide it at a reasonable cost. Much less than you're currently paying. Ask the FBI."

"Son of a gun! They've been holding out on me. So, how do we" The President was cut off by the entrance of a sour faced person. Melanie was instantly tense. Muriel's squad ranged behind her in a high state of readiness.

"Sir, you really mustn't just take off without letting me know where you were going to be. We've had to cancel several important appointments, already today, and I have no idea how we're going to reschedule them," the man said.

"David, I DID tell you I'd be out, and I told you to cancel those appointments. There was a reason why I did so, whether you choose to believe it or not. Nor were they that important, especially in light of current events. Now quit trying to show off."

"Well, they were certainly more important than this bunch of children," David said with a form of condescending disgust that Muriel found fascinating. She'd never seen it's like before.

Muriel signaled the President to let her take it. "Hi, David. I know we haven't been formally introduced, but I feel I know you in a way that you wouldn't find flattering. My name is Muriel," she said, pulling two booklets out of her pocket. "This will help you understand just who I am and why the President may feel that I have some importance." She handed him the black booklet, the US Passport with the word Diplomat on it. "And if that isn't enough, there's this one," and she passed him the green one. "Do look inside to verify my identity before you go making absurd comments about children not being Ambassadors. I've become a bit irritated with people that don't keep up with current affairs. And, as the head of the President's Detail will tell you, I've been known to be a bit . . . um . . . outrageous on occasion."

She turned to the President and said, "Sir, untrainable."

"So I see, Muriel. I should have looked before," the President said. "Now, I wonder just how much I've been missing because he set up the appointments."

"Well, I don't know what you're talking about, but I'll just take these and see about this, little girl," David said.

"Oh, dear. He used the 'little girl' term. I'm sorry, Mr. President," Melanie said, "there's just no holding her back, now."

Muriel just grinned. And grew. She reached in a 'no pocket' and withdrew the two passports and fanned them to show that she had them back, then put them away. Then back-handed him across the face. "I might – MIGHT – accept insults from the President. But from a mere minion, never. I just don't bully worth a darn."

"David, I'm sorry, but your services will no longer be needed. Melanie, can you have someone escort him off the grounds and have someone get his personal effects for him?"

"Sure thing, Mr. President." She spoke into a microphone for a minute and two Marine guards entered and took charge of him shortly after.

"You can't get away with this. The party . . .," David began.

"The party will soon hear about their attempt to unduly influence me, David. They were warned when I was running for this office what would happen if I found out that they were trying to manipulate me. And we've had our run-ins in the past. I'll deal with them."

"Sir, if you're going to go after the political parties, should I hold your ex-chief of staff until we can get warrants to raid the party headquarters?"

"Hmm. Good point, Melanie. But I think we'll pass on that for the moment. If they do something blatant, then we'll go after them," he said. "Now, let me call down and see who acts as David's second, and get him or her up here. Oh, and Homeland Security. I want to take a good look at that woman."

In minutes a frazzled looking woman came into the President's office and did a double-take when she saw Muriel and her security squad. "Problems, Miss Frazier?" he asked.

"No, sir. I just . . . I didn't realize that Ambassador Muriel ever left Enclave," she said.

"Oh, they let me out of my cage once in a while. Usually under what passes for adult supervision – meaning Ted," Muriel quipped.

"Oh, I wish I could get the training!" Miss Frazier responded.

"Miss Frazier, look at me . . . oh, sorry, Muriel. Maybe"

"No, no, go ahead. You've got two people and five Envoys here to help out, if you need it," Muriel said.

"OK, then. Miss Frazier, look at me," the President said, starting the spiel. A minute later a shocked, amazed and delighted look passed over Miss Frazier's face. "Melanie, how

long do you think?"

"Maybe ten minutes to get her safe, then another ten or fifteen to get her dressed. I can handle that in your bathroom, if you don't mind," she said to the President.

"By all means. Would you continue?" he asked.

"Nope. You started it, you continue it. We'll help if needed. But you know what to do," Melanie replied.

So, the President put Miss Frazier through finding and linking to power, then shields. The sudden appearance of Don with a baseball bat swinging at her caused the officers in the room to instinctively reach for weapons before they realized who it was.

"Congratulations, Mr. President. You got her through the tough stuff, alone. Melanie, she's good for two," he said, retrieving his bat from Miss Frazier's shield and winking out.

"How'd he know?" the President asked, as Melanie and a female Envoy went to the bathroom.

"Oh, I told him," Muriel said. "And he's always ready with a bat to test shields. Don't tell me that Melanie did it the noisy way."

"No. She had one of her team use a bat on me. Startled me when he did it, but it never touched me. I didn't even realize it was there until I looked. Afterward, she told me that she had me backstopped, just in case. I did the same with Miss Frazier. I have a hunch that either you or Melanie did, too."

"You're right. Maybe both of us. But hers held."

"You people don't waste any time, do you," the President said. "You look so laid back and casual, but things happen fast around you."

"Oh, I don't know. Sometimes I wonder if I move fast enough. Things just happen one after another, and I keep dealing with them. Melanie's the same way, you know," Muriel said. "Oh, by the way, sir. The next one is yours. I'm getting tired of explaining myself to people all the time. Particularly people who should know better. So, the next time someone in your office wants me to leave because I'm just a kid, I'd like you to handle it. Maybe I can learn what I'm doing wrong."

"Oh, I don't think it's"

"Mr. President. It's about time you asked me to come in. I've been waiting all day to talk to you about this mess. If you'd just ask the kids to leave, we can get to work."

"Ms. De Luca, I think you're suffering from some form of miss-information. I called you here for MY purposes, not for yours. However, to be fair, what mess are you referring to,

now?” asked the President.

“Why, the outlandish way that those Envyies or whatever they're called are behaving. Buying up companies, having people arrested and offices raided without even asking me whether or not they are allowed to do it. And this training farce. It's all fake, illusion and hypnosis, if you ask me.”

“I see. Ms. De Luca, you may have your resignation on my desk at your earliest convenience. And in case you don't know what that term means, well, when a President says it, it means immediately. The young lady you maligned is Ambassador Muriel. A two way Ambassador, I might add, since it's both to and from Home. The training you refer to is not fake, illusion or hypnosis, as you'd know if you took it. However, I can see that you can't take it. That's an easy deduction from your behavior.”

“Oh, and as for the Envoys buying companies, that was completely legal as per the laws and regulations that your political party fought so hard to have enacted,” the President said. “They'll be under review, soon. And as for having people arrested, that's a law enforcement activity, not a Homeland Security activity. In fact, in the past few months I haven't seen anything of yours cross my desk that pertained to the security of the country. Rather the opposite, as a matter of fact. You've been dabbling in all sorts of things that have to do with giving companies more rights than real human beings. I've rejected every one of them, and you still haven't gotten the point. You're fired. Don't bother with the letter of resignation.”

“Melanie,” he added, as she walked out of the bathroom, “would you see that Ms. De Luca's office is locked and inaccessible to her. She no longer works as the head of Homeland Security. Have her personal things sent to whatever address she wants, and get a receipt, if you please. Then go through everything in her office with an eye to criminal charges.”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“This is outrageous! You're taking the word of foreigners over mine?” De Luca asked.

“No, I'm taking the word of an American citizen, backed by proof that you and your organization should have gotten for me. In fact, the American citizen that you blatantly dismissed as a child. Oh, and for your information, though you shouldn't need it, 'envy' is a term of either resentment or admiration. In your case, I think it was probably the former. And as for the training they provide, perhaps Muriel would be so kind as to demonstrate something of it.”

“My pleasure, Mr. President. **NOW HERE THIS** she sent. Then stood up and grew. And grew some more. Her eyes blazed, her stripes blazed, her uniform turned white and glowed, and she reached down and picked the hapless woman up like a doll. **I REALLY DO NOT LIKE THE LACK OF RESPECT THAT YOU AND YOUR ASSOCIATES ACCORD ME. THE NEXT TIME IT HAPPENS I JUST MIGHT BECOME IRRITATED. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?** Then she set her back down, and reverted to her normal self.

"Was something like that what you had in mind, sir? Or would you prefer me to take her to judgment square and let her find out all by herself what her faults are. With a soul as dark as hers it's doubtful that she'd survive the trip sane," Muriel said.

"Oh, I think that, for demonstration purposes, that was quite adequate," he replied, with a very large grin on his face at De Luca's obvious discomfort. "I must say that you certainly have a way of cutting to the core of things in a hurry. I'll have to practice some more. I can see applications of that little demonstration. Perhaps Melanie would be willing to coach me."

"Any time, Mr. President. Any time at all," she replied with a grin.

"Now, if you'd be so kind, Melanie, as to have someone remove this . . . person . . . I think we've done enough for today."

"Easily done, sir," Melanie said, and a detail member appeared with Ms. De Luca's coat, keys and purse, having checked first to see that nothing pertaining to the government was inside. He handed the items to De Luca, then translated her out.

"There is one other piece of business you need to attend to, sir. Unless you want Muriel or I to do it. I took the liberty of running Miss Frazier through the rest of the training. She'll need more practice, of course. But I felt it better to get the whole thing done today, then add the frills later. Hope you don't mind, Muriel."

"I don't mind. Does he know how to do it?"

"Not yet, but he will."

"What . . . ?" began the President.

"Stripes, sir. She's your student. You deserve the right to give her her stripes."

"Oh. Miss Frazier, do you have any preferences as to who awards you your stripes?" he asked.

"No sir. I'm just happy that I've got the training."

"Very well. Melanie, would you coach me?" he asked. An intense moment of non-verbal communication ensued, then he said, "That's it?"

"That's how it's done, sir."

"Very well, then. Harrumph. People expect that when something serious is going down, you know," he said with a grin. "Miss Frazier, would you put up your arms where you can see them, and think of your favorite gem, please?" And a second later there were stripes as bracelets on her arms and tears in her eyes.

"Now," Muriel said, "based on what Melanie sent me, and what I can see myself, I'd like

you to look in your 'no pocket' for a little green booklet that will explain some things.”

Miss Frazier pulled out her brand new passport and stared at it. Then looked inside at the certificate, and began crying all over again. “Oh, my. I really did it.”

“Yes, you did,” Muriel said. “And I think you broke the record for speed in training. But do get after Melanie for more practice. Or come out to Enclave some weekend, and meet my crew, and we'll help you practice and give you some additional training that might help. And now,” she added, “I think it's time I got back to Enclave for the night. Along with the possibility of sleep – it's been a LONG day – I'd kinda like to find out what else has been found out about the economy wreckers.”

Chapter 38

The End of the Beginning (Monday morning)

When Muriel got back to Enclave, Sunday evening, she found that they hadn't gotten much more information than they'd had when she left. So, she was left with a leisurely dinner and some time to watch TV before bed. Morning, however, was something different.

Going to her office, Muriel noted the very large smile on Mata's face, but her security chief wouldn't tell her what it was all about. Her summary of the world's news didn't show anything outstanding. Then Ted came in.

"OK, what did you do, this time?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"I've had the President on the phone three times this morning, and I haven't even managed to finish my first cup of coffee. The last time he said that he'd be bringing some important people in on Air Force Zero. What the heck is that?"

Muriel laughed. "The President is trained. Between him and Melanie, I bet they could bring a bunch of people. And if I know Melanie, she'll have at least one squad of the detail with her. Air Force Zero, huh? No pilot, no plane. Just him," and she laughed again.

"Well, I've got a crew modifying the training room in Guest House to hold them. He said it would be a conference, so they're putting in a stage and uncomfortable chairs." That drew another laugh from Muriel. "He refused to tell me who would be coming or what it was about. Just that he wanted me there."

"So, what do you want me to do?" Muriel asked.

"Just be your pretty, little self," he said.

"Sorry, you'll have to wait a few years for that," she replied.

Ted looked at her for a moment, then said, "You've really got to get over that. You ARE pretty, in your own way."

"Oh, now THERE'S the kiss of death."

"No. What it means is that you aren't a classic beauty but you have something that's attractive but hard to describe. Along with an inner glow that just seems to fill a room. When you're there, everyone else is second best," he said. "I'm probably saying it wrong. But you really are pretty. And it's your own kind of pretty that others can't even begin to approach."

"Well, I'll take your word for it. So, you want me to meet them as they come in?" she asked.

"No. He did ask that you be there, on stage with him and me. But I don't know that he wants you to do anything," he said.

"OK," she said with a puzzled shrug. "I guess I can do that. Just let me know when."

Ted left and Mata came in. "You may have a problem," Mata said.

"I know. But if I don't react to it, it may go away. I'd hate to have to use stronger methods," Muriel replied. "Basically, I'll just treat him as I have been – something between a friend and a father."

"Both of those can be dangerous, too, I understand."

"You're right," Muriel said. "There's no safety for girls. Well, there wasn't until the training. But we have to get it out more before most girls will have that safety from being a target. Now, are you going to tell me what your grin was all about?"

"Well, according to Melanie, he's gotten enough off the disks we sent to hang a bunch of people out to dry. Including members of Congress. So, he's inviting them all to a party on the front lawn. And he isn't accepting a 'regrets' to his invitation," Mata said. "He borrowed a bunch of Envoys and are bringing these people in whether or not they want to come. In fact, he isn't even giving them the option of saying they don't want to come. Some of them are from all over the world, but most are right here in America. Including those members of Congress I talked about. Oh, and he's including the leaders of both national party headquarters. Melanie's going to do what you did, Sunday."

"Oh, gad! Does she have any idea what that does to someone that's so black?"

"Yes. She talked to her dad, last night. The Envoys that will be in the conference with you all are from the guides. He wants those people sane enough to stand trial, but compliant enough to not fight it too hard," Mata replied.

"So, when are they due in?" Muriel asked.

"Soon, from what I understand," Mata replied.

"OK, then I'm going to go down to Guest House, and see what Ted's got for a remodeling of the training room."

"Oh, before you go. That religion that attacked Fran? You knew, didn't you, that the leaders of the religion itself, not just the ministers involved in the fiasco, were arrested. The rest of the ministers, those having no part in the mess, voted to dissolve the corporation or whatever it's called. Officially, it no longer exists. And your demonstration appears to have

had more effect than you knew. People – individuals, that is, not groups – have shown signs of having been affected by just the televised visual of judgment square. Not affected badly. Apparently they were not too unbalanced. But nonetheless affected. We're trying to get more information, like what size TV they had, and what kind of people they were.”

“Now, that's interesting, that even just the image of the visual of judgment square could have an affect on people,” Muriel said. “That certainly wasn't what I was led to believe.”

“Well, we're checking,” Mata said. “They may just be some particularly sensitive people.”

“Muriel,” Ted said, suddenly translating in, “I just got the word from Melanie. They'll be on the way in about five minutes.”

“OK, coming master,” she replied with a grin. “Lead, I'll follow.” And they translated directly to the newly built stage.

The floor in front of the stage was bare. No chairs. The only chairs were on the stage.

“It was felt that the chairs could end up being dangerous to the people that Melanie and the President are bringing in,” Ted said. “I'm not even sure that the ones on the stage will be used.”

The people were translated in. Each had an Envoy with him or her, and the rows and columns were set up in such a way that no person had another person next to them – each person had an Envoy on either side except at the ends, and most, except for the front and back rows, had an Envoy in front of and behind him or her. Each person was under a confining shield, and under sound baffles to keep anything they said from reaching others. One hundred people. One hundred Envoys. When they were assembled, the President and Melanie translated in.

“You are not the top of the pyramid,” the President said, stepping to the podium. “But, you are close. And without you the top will be unable to affect the rest. It will be cut off and helpless. We have the connections from you people on down to businesses, politicians, religions, and media. We know your contacts. We know your finances. We know what you have done to the finances of the world. And we do not approve.”

He looked around at the massed people, then said, “You will face something, today, in the next few minutes, that would normally occur at the end of your lives here on earth. You will face your judgment. You will know who you are and what you have done to harm the people of the world. But this will not be the end of your lives. We are giving you a chance to atone for the wrongs you have done. The method of your atonement will not be up to me – it will be up to the courts, who will have an unbroken chain of evidence on each of you.”

“At one time,” he said, “you were innocent. At some point you decided that you wanted something that someone else had. Early, fumbling attempts were met with discipline. But instead of teaching you not to be greedy, it taught you to be deceptive – to hide what you did.

And as you grew in your warped search for more – more money, more power, more control over other people – your skills at manipulation and deceptiveness also grew. But, now you have been found out, and your manipulation of people, of money through various means, of power over whole countries is at an end, as is that of your masters.”

The President stepped back, and the image of judgment square slowly went from transparent to solid around the people. And each person reacted differently. Some screamed. Some tried to beat their head on the floor. Some tried to attack others outside the shield placed around them and ended up just beating on the shield. Some wept. And it went on. And on. Fifteen minutes. Twenty minutes. And finally, the last person stood in abject despair at his life. And Muriel pitied them, especially since she knew what awaited them and what investigations were ongoing.

Stepping to the podium, she said, “You have been judged. And now you know. The harshest judgment comes from the one that knows you the best – you, yourself. But there is hope, if you choose to take it. A way to atone for what you have done. What that way is is as individual as each of you are. The one method that you might contemplate is closed to you. You will not commit suicide. That will not provide atonement for you. That will simply leave you with no way to atone, which will be worse than the way you feel now. I suggest that you find that way quickly, before the general public finds out what you have done and are responsible for. The police have your names and descriptions and last known location. When we are done here, you will be returned to that location, and it may be that your opportunity to atone and regain some balance will be taken from you at that point. Your homes and businesses are being searched, under warrants issued in whatever country you reside or have property. Prison does not result in atonement. Nor does your execution, which some countries are advocating. You have made a great many people angry with your behavior. So, now, it is up to you.”

Then Muriel stepped back and Ted approached the podium. “Here is the chance we offer you,” he said. “Instead of dropping you at your last location, which might have angry people surrounding it, we'll take you to your local police. An Envoy will go with you and take copies of the evidence that's been collected against you. In this country, an FBI or Secret Service officer will be there to take charge of you. In other countries, what ever passes for the federal police will have an officer there to collect you. We will even try to find a reputable lawyer willing to take your case to defend you. But only if you choose to accept that as an offer. We cannot force you to accept. But we do encourage you. It is your life, and your after-life that is at stake. Think about it. Talk to the Envoys that brought you here – they will not judge you. In fact, their job in Home is to help newly arrived souls to try to find balance.” And he stepped back from the podium.

Muriel and the President found seats. Ted and Melanie remained standing, in fact they stood behind their respective partner and principal. And they waited. It was about a half hour before the first ones began to leave. It was a full hour after that, or more, before the last had left, and the four were free to translate to Muriel's office.

“Have you ever noticed,” Ted said as he took a seat in the casual area, “that whenever there's a meeting of a group it invariably takes place in Muriel's office?”

"Well, of course. That's because she's a better hostess, more attractive, more relaxing, provides food and drink, and even provides entertainment like when she takes jabs at you," Melanie said.

Ted looked pained and the President laughed. "I see," the President said, "that I'll have to work at looking more attractive. Melanie, do you suppose you'd have a dress that would fit me?"

"Don't do it, Melanie. Can you just see the look on the face of President of the People's Republic of China when he comes to visit and the President's wearing a Pinafore?" Muriel asked.

"Hmm," Ted interjected. "I always thought that Pinafore was a comic opera by Gilbert and Sullivan. Better that he should dress as one of the Pirates of Penzance. Perhaps Frederic." Mata just moved her glass of grape and berry mix further away from her keyboard and monitor.

"Oh, dear," the President said, with a perfectly straight face and a high voice. "And here I always wanted to play the part of Mable." And that did it. Despite its distance from Mata, the glass went over and spilled the mixture all over the floor around her desk. The only thing that saved the glass from breaking was that it was plastic. And all four in the casual area burst into laughter.

"Oh, I needed that," Muriel said. "Even if we did do damage to Gilbert and Sullivan."

"Well, not too much damage. They did a lot, themselves. 'That infernal nonsense, Pinafore' is actually mentioned in the patter song of the Major General in Pirates," Ted said. "And, in one production I saw, the chase scene at the end ends up going through a production of Pinafore that's being played, badly, by what was meant to be a small town amateur orchestra."

"HERE!" Mata said, and thrust a bunch of papers at Ted. "And if any of them are purple and sticky, it's your fault! It's not safe for a girl to take a drink around here," she added. "Maybe I SHOULD trade places with Bart for a while. Teach you all a lesson."

Unfortunately, this was said just as Bart was walking in. "Do you really think they'd prefer the Reverend Charles Dodgson? I've always liked Jabberwocky, myself," he said. "It's full of all sorts of nonsense."

Mata tried very hard to look sternly at Bart, at the innocent face he put on. It didn't work. Shortly, she was laughing, too, and Bart just smiled benignly at her. Muriel noted his look, and smiled to herself. It was good to see the two of them getting along.

"Mata," Bart said, "you're getting overworked and stressed. That's why I'm here, to help."

"What, you're going to help me get overworked and stressed even more?" she asked.

"No, my crew has done what it can, for now. So I'm free to take some of the load. I'll even set up a desk, subservient to yours, of course, so you can bark at me for being slow," he said, with a smile. "That way, you can relax some and just oversee what gets done."

"Oh, Bart . . . it's just that everything is coming so fast right now. Even the on duty squad is being pushed."

"So? Pass some of it to my on duty squad. Let them share the load. Come on, Mata, You gave us the easy job of organizing the evidence for the group that just left. Let us in on the fun."

"All right, Bart," she said, and sent mental commands to the on duty squad, and Bart paralleled them with his squad. Shortly, the strain left her face.

::Stay out of it, Ted,:: Muriel sent. ::Let them sort it out,:: "Ted, what have you got there?" Muriel said, openly.

"Oh, the results on that group. About three quarters of them took my advice and went to the police and confessed and got lawyers. The rest tried to tough it out. All but two were arrested on the spot, as soon as they appeared. The two? Somehow the crowd knew who they were and what they'd done. Not our doing. Someone else has been doing some research and put together enough to upset people. They're dead. The police couldn't stop them," Ted said.

"Well," said the President, "you DID give them the choice. Nothing you could have done about it."

"Oh, I know. It's just sad that some people are that greedy that they can't see when they've lost a battle," Ted replied. "The Envoys that were with them said that the people thought they could lie or bluff their way out of it, but the crowd got to them first."

"Well, if they were thinking that we got the information and evidence illegally, they were sadly mistaken. Oh, we got the leads from them in 'unorthodox' ways. But we didn't use them as evidence," Mata said. "We just pointed directions to look in, and the evidence we had in those areas pointed the rest of the way once we had the direction. We probably would have gotten it, ourselves, in the next week. It was all there. Just a matter of putting it all together."

"Yep. So, what's left now is the larger, action side of it. The people that actually implemented the orders given by the group we just let go," Ted said. "Henry sent that they won't move on the implementers until he can do so all at once. He doesn't expect that will be any sooner than tomorrow, and maybe later than that. He is tracking movements, though. He laughed when he said that his squad found it easy to place trackers without being seen. OH! That's why. He's trained a bunch of people. They set them in by translating them to the locations. Nasty man." And he laughed.

“Well,” said the President, “I hate to bust up this happy party, but Miss Frazier just sent that one of the ones on the next list has been all over her demanding an immediate appointment with me. I suppose I'd better go see what he wants. And yes, I'll play dumb. It's something that I've become good at,” he said with an ironic grin. And he and Melanie translated out.

“Lunch?” asked Ted.

“What are you proposing?” Muriel asked, coyly.

“I'm not proposing anything,” Ted said as he turned red. “I just thought you might like some lunch and some company.”

“Ah. Well, I usually just have lunch at my desk, and let my mind drift into different areas, sometimes checking for information on things on the Internet. But, if you'd like to take me somewhere, I might be willing,” she replied.

“You MINX! You know very well that we don't get charged for anything at restaurants, so I wouldn't be 'taking you somewhere'. Just what are you trying to imply?”

“Why, nothing at all. I just like to see you blush. Sure. Let's go to lunch,” she said. “Besides, half the fun was spoiled by the fact that Bart and Mata were ignoring us.”

Chapter 39

What Happens in Enclave Stays in Enclave (Monday afternoon)

“Ted, just how far can we stretch this?” Muriel asked, out of the blue.

“Say, huh?”

“Oh, I was thinking about Enclave, and the Embassy status and just what it entailed. Is this actually considered a portion of Home? Are we like a foreign country, surrounded by another country? Do the laws of Home prevail here, or is it a mix of Home and American?”

“Whew. OK, you don't ask easy questions. First, have you read the Treaty?” Ted asked.

“Yep. All thirty pages of it. Also the title to the property including the map showing the boundaries. But not any structures,” she replied.

“OK, what I did was to literally come in and buy up the property. The state was grateful for the income, since they were considered the previous owners. There was some resistance from the county, because they saw us as trying to set up another city. They wanted to support the existing cities on either side of us with taxes on us, but not provide any services in return,” Ted said. “About that time, I was also setting up the Treaty. And that was a horrid mess. Congress wanted one set of impossible things put into it, and the State Department wanted another set, and they conflicted. So, I did an end run.”

Ted set back and pushed his plate away from him, signaling that he was finished. “I went to the state and told them that, since I owned the property, I was willing to pay taxes on it. But that since the county and cities on either side weren't providing any services I refused to be classed as part of either one of them. And either the state could straighten them out, or I'd abandon the property, the state wouldn't get any taxes and would have to find some other poor sucker to play the games. The state buckled. County admitted that, as long as I paid taxes on the property, they wouldn't get involved in the dispute with the cities. And then I played my trump card. I paid the taxes to the state and county for one hundred years.”

“They choked,” Ted said, with a smile. “They went to the two cities involved in the dispute and pulled out maps. None of the property I'd purchased was any part of either of the cities. The cities weren't supplying anything to the property – not even water or sewage treatment. And they were disinclined to go to court against someone that could pay taxes one hundred years in advance, ON TOP OF having paid cash for the property. That gave me the foothold I needed. I brought in Envoys and built the complex and set up the core businesses.”

“Now, at that point, the Feds took notice of what was happening. They got the county

to scream zoning violation. That went nowhere. Then they tried to charge us for each building we put up as additional taxes. So I walked them in front of a State judge and showed them the contract with the county. The number of buildings to be put on the property was clearly listed. End of case.” Ted just grinned at the memory of that. “So the Feds decided that I had illegal immigrants doing the work. Then sent in ICE. Oh, sorry, Immigration and Customs Enforcement. They hit the main gate and bounced, literally.”

“Now, I’m going to have to digress a bit,” Ted said. “The Treaty. The President knew who I was – well, the current me, anyway. So, he knew that giving the State Department the information it wanted was impossible. So he trumped them, himself. Congress was a bit more difficult. They wanted to be able to send forces into Enclave any time they wanted to check and make sure we were abiding by the Treaty. So, the President called a joint meeting and spent two hours giving them all the boring details of what other Embassies had as rights. Then he told them that if they didn’t sign off on the Treaty, that he’d publish the fact to the general public, along with the names of all the Congress persons that voted against it, and citing the fact that we had the ability to help the economy. The Treaty was ratified in MY form the next day.”

“So, back to the Feds and ICE,” Ted said. “I walked up to the gate, armed to the teeth with a fully automatic rifle and side arm. I put about twenty rounds through the engine block of the vehicle they tried to put through the apparently open gate. One of the ICE agents started waving a warrant at me saying that they had the right to check for illegal immigrants. I told him to talk to his boss about trying an armed entry on an Embassy of a friendly foreign nation. So, he checked with his boss by phone, and discovered that I could have arrested him and all his troops for trespass and attempted forced entry.”

“So, Enclave is its own jurisdiction. Those that break the law, here, can be arrested and held for trial by us,” Ted explained. “We have the right to do that. There was only one problem with it. We don’t have any laws. Home doesn’t need them. And, at that time, we only had one ruler, if you want to call me that. So, the government of Home – me – convened a special session and laid out the laws and ordinances that the Ambassador of Home – me again – would follow and enforce in Enclave.” By this time Muriel was laughing. “I then sent this spurious document to the President, and Congress added it to the Treaty.

“Now for the final part of the joke,” he said, grinning. “One of the points of that list of laws and ordinances was that the Ambassador could change the laws and ordinances, without notice, at his discretion. In fact, really, it was the ONLY point on that list. Which means, everything that we’ve done inside the grounds of Enclave has been covered, legally, by the laws and ordinances of Enclave as ratified by the ruling body of Home and enforced by the Ambassador. Ambassadors, plural, now. Because you are also listed as both part of the ruling body of Home and part of the enforcement in Enclave.”

By now, Muriel was having a hard time sitting in her chair. “You goof!” she said through her laughter, “it was a set-up from the beginning!”

“Yep. So, none of our clandestine operations have been illegal, because they have the backing of you, me, and the ruling body of Home – you and me, again,” Ted said with a laugh.

“Heck, we could even execute an offender, here, if we wanted to. In fact, that's how we got away with eliminating that one group of renegades that included the Judge. The President wasn't pleased by that event, but saw the wisdom of it and kept quiet. So, basically, we make the laws, here, and enforce them as we see fit. It helped that they were renegades and not real humans.”

“You scammed the United States government!” Muriel exclaimed with admiration.

“You bet. But it gives us the freedom to operate, to train other people and to try to help those who have lost hope,” Ted said. “Besides, I had to. The State Department was coming down hard that they had to have a location and customs inspections and visas and all sorts of crap. They couldn't accept that there wasn't a location that they could get to to bomb if they felt the need. That one was cured by simply putting in the Treaty that anyone that was capable of traveling from Home to America, or America to Home was allowed to enter the country freely. I figured we'd get around the importation of stuff by making it here. I never thought of coffee as a commodity that anyone would want. However, after two years of being open for business, and after Henry wanted some of it, I got that changed, too.”

ATTENTION – ATTENTION – WE HAVE FAST MOVING AIRCRAFT HEADED TOWARD ENCLAVE FROM THE SOUTH ALL PERSONNEL

::BELAY THAT!:: Muriel sent. ::Kids, meet me in front of my office::

“What are you going to do?” asked Ted.

“First, I'm going to see what their intentions are. And if they're what I think they are, they'll be grounded, the pilots captured and questioned. And then I'll follow the chain backward,” Muriel said, and translated.

::Don, did I ever show you kids how to create a laser?::

::No, ma'am. By the way, it's two groups, about eleven planes. Fighters, and they're definitely headed in to us::

::Airborne, now!:: Muriel sent to her friends. And as soon as they were up, **SHIELD ENCLAVE. LOCK DOWN ALL ENTRANCES AND EXITS. I SAY AGAIN, SHIELD FOR NUCLEAR.**

::Go high, keep your shields tight,:: she sent. ::Hive mind, now, and go to your animal masks::

Ted, out in the street, simply muttered, “Let slip the dogs of war.”

::Everybody pick a plane. Disable the ejection mechanism first. Blow the canopy next, so they can't get above us. Then disable the engines and put them in the wasteland. I want the pilots alive::

::We've got two people left over,:: Don sent.

::You and me. Here's how to create a laser. It takes a lot of power, but it should be able to disintegrate any missiles that they manage to let loose. Don't let them get close to Enclave,:: she sent to Don. Then to the whole children's squadron she sent, ::OK, friends, we come out of the sun, behind them. We're radar invisible, so they won't pick us up on their instruments. You know what to do. Leave any missiles to Don and I. Have fun!::

Twelve humans with wolf heads and one black panther came in over the aircraft. Shattered canopies showed that everyone had managed to make contact. The sudden silence showed that the engines had been killed, and the kids took control of the planes and put them into the ground of the wasteland, hard. Those aircraft would never fly again.

ENCLAVE! YOU CAN RETURN TO NORMAL. THE THREAT IS PASSED. I NEED TEN VOLUNTEERS FOR POLICE DUTY.

Before she could continue, three squads of her security detail were beside the planes, snapping seat-belts like toilet paper, and dragging the pilots out of the planes. Another three squads joined them, and they shield clamped the pilots, stripped them, and translated them to the training room of Guest House. Muriel stopped, briefly, at her office and handed Mata a disk.

"That's from the time the alert went out to the time that the pilots were translated out. Sorry, but it's all from my point of view," Muriel said.

"No it isn't," Mata said. "From the time you went to 'hive mind' you gathered the information from all the kids. Plus Envoys all over Enclave saw that dog-fight. General Stuart is going to have some doing to do to beat what you kids did. I'll have this out to the media, immediately."

"OK, thanks. Gotta run," Muriel replied, and she translated directly to the stage of the training room. Ted was there before her.

::Envoys, if you would, please, hold the pilots. I don't have time to be gentle,:: she sent. Then she dove into the minds and found the information she was looking for – the identity of the one that gave the orders for them to attack Enclave.

"Ted, I'm going after him and bringing him back," she said.

"No, you're going with six squads, and will send him back with two Envoys when you've got the next link out of him," Ted replied. "We want to roll this up as fast as possible. Use my squads for couriers," he added. "I'll congratulate the kids, for you. They did themselves proud. What do you want done with the planes?"

"I'll destroy them when I get back. Unless you think that you can do it. Make a record, though, and have Mata or Bart send it out, please."

“Consider it done,” Ted said, and Muriel translated.

Two minutes later, two of Ted's squad returned with the commander of the Air Force that had sent the planes. Two minutes later a businessman from that country was also in custody. It was four minutes before another person was sent back to Enclave, then another two minutes after that. The last one was the president of a multinational bank headquartered in Hong Kong. Muriel and the rest of the squad members returned to Enclave with him.

“That's all of them, Ted. They figured to take us by surprise, so they didn't bother with the elaborate cutouts that they usually used for communication. This last one is in the top of the pyramid. And he knows the rest of them,” Muriel said.

“My turn. Take a break. We're stashing them in the warehouse next to Triple E. A bunch of the Envoys that work here in Enclave but were off duty came in and turned it into a very up-to-date prison. And the cells are baffled so that the prisoners can't talk to each other. Plus, the fronts of the cells are mirrored one way, so the prisoners can see out, but not see into the cells across from them.”

“My, my, Ted. You're getting as nasty as I am.”

“Not me. They had it all done before I even thought of it. They're getting more and more spontaneous and inventive,” he said. He got the information and visuals from Muriel, then gathered the six squads and translated.

Ted's trip was longer than Muriel's, but he also sent back fifty people before he was done. Five of them were women. All the people were treated alike – stripped then translated to the warehouse for incarceration.

“Sorry about taking so long,” Ted said. “Two of them were families, and we picked up all the adults. So we had to get Envoys in to take care of the children.”

“So, that's all of them?” asked Muriel.

“Yea,” Ted said, tiredly. “We cross checked the adults as we picked them up. We didn't come up with any that we hadn't already picked up. Anyone contact Melanie or the President to see how things went with him, and what to do with these people?”

“I don't know. I'll check. Sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about. You've done a magnificent job. Like there were seven of you,” Ted said, and smiled.

“Hmm. I detect a pun in there, someplace. So, what's the media got to say about this?” she asked.

“Oh, just that Enclave had once again proven that they knew what to do in an emergency, and could defend themselves. They DID make a big thing over the fact that the

whole operation – meaning the dogfight – was over quickly and without any casualties. Mata did a nice job of splicing everything together and getting all the points of view in. The only thing left for the media to do was to censor the pilots when they were stripped. Say, why'd you have the Envoys do that?"

"I didn't. Once again, they anticipated, I think. Seems to me that some people were treated that way in one of the wars. POW's or concentration camp prisoners, or something. I think it's to make them feel off balance and helpless," Muriel said. "Those pajama uniforms they came up with for them are almost as good. They have to hold the pants up with one hand, or they fall down. No belts."

::Melanie? What happened back in Washington?: Muriel asked.

"Oh, nothing much. We did roll up another section that we didn't know about. We also saw that you were busy. Where'd you learn to fly like that?" Melanie asked, translating in.

"Oh, we had an Air Force General come out for training. He figured it out. Didn't you see the media coverage of the game the kids invented?"

"No. I must have missed that," Melanie said.

"Mata, do we have a copy of that media video on the game?" Muriel asked.

"Yep. A copy is on your computer. I knew you'd like to show off," Mata said, with a grin.

Muriel brought it up and turned the screen so Melanie could see it. The video of the Envoys playing the game impressed her. Then she saw the kids go at it.

"Holy CRAP!" she said, jumping out of her seat. "How could they do that without running into each other?"

"What we call 'hive mind' or 'group mind'," Muriel said. "It isn't really like either of those. No leader giving orders. We just know where we all are, and where we're going to be. Obviously, it would be dangerous to translate under those circumstances, but for just flying, even at those speeds, it's no problem. So, we just used that as the basis, plus a few orders as to what needed to be done and in what order, and the kids took it from that. Don and I stood off, in case they fired any missiles before the kids could disable the planes."

"What would you have done with the missiles, just stopped them?"

"Oh, something else you haven't seen. This isn't to get around. Come with me." Muriel took her up to her apartment, and the patio, and fired a laser shot at a shrub in the wasteland.

"O-K, I can see why you don't want that to get around. But can you teach it to me?"

"I'll have to ask Ted," Muriel said. "He's playing it really close on this one." They went back down to the casual area. Ted walked in just as they arrived.

"Yes," he said.

"Yes, what, oh great leader?" Muriel shot back.

"You can teach her. You can also teach the FBI and any of the military. But no civilians. Oh, and Tex can know. I just don't want civilians taking potshots at each other until we can determine if a shield can stop it," Ted said.

"OH! I hadn't thought of that," Muriel said. "See? That's why we keep you around. You think. Unlike me who simply thinks I think."

Mata had created a new glass with a special 'spill-proof' lid. And she calmly moved it to a remote area of her desk where she wouldn't inadvertently knock it over. Then looked quizzically at Muriel and Ted, waiting for some zinger to come back. She seemed disappointed when they didn't do anything but laugh.

"By the way, Melanie, what do you want done with our prisoners?" Muriel asked.

"Prisoners? I didn't know you TOOK prisoners."

"Oh, yes. All those pilots, plus we rolled back up the line and got the top of the pyramid. We're holding them in special cells in the warehouse across the street," Muriel said.

"You're kidding! How'd you do that?" Melanie asked.

"Oh, they had to move so fast that they didn't use their cutouts and blinds to pass the orders to attack us. So, when I got the pilots, I just raided their minds for where the orders came from, then worked my way up the line like that, sending them back here to be held. When it hit a certain level, we started getting multiple names. That was under Ted, and he cross checked between them to be sure there weren't any more. If you can't accept them under those circumstances then we'll take care of them. After all, they attacked Enclave."

"What would YOU do with them?" Melanie asked.

"Send them Home without a return ticket," Ted said. "Under the treaty, we can do that." Melanie just shivered. "Melanie, it's not cold blooded. Nor is it done in anger. They endangered Enclave and any civilians both inside and outside Enclave. Those were nuclear tipped missiles. It was only the speed of Muriel and her friends that kept that from happening. Think about the fallout downwind of us, and what it would have done even a state or two over. And all because we wouldn't let them continue running the world into the ground, so to speak. We're not heartless. They'd never feel it. Quick and clean, and send the bodies back to the next of kin."

"Oh, I understand. I don't have to like it, but I understand. In a war, you have to make

those kinds of decisions.”

“Yes, and this was a war. One of the worst kinds of war. It was a war against civilians, and a world war at that, even though no earthly country was actively engaged in it,” Muriel said. “So, find out what the President wants to do. And make sure you play the 'nuclear card' when you tell him. OK?”

“Yea. I'd better be getting back. Can he contact you for any further information?”

“Of course he can. He's trained, he can reach us easily,” Ted said. And Melanie translated out.

Chapter 40

A Visit from an Old Friend (Tuesday morning)

"All right, young lady," Stuart said. "Would you like to explain just what you've been doing behind my back?"

"Probably your job, General," she said with a grin. "Seriously, they were attacking Enclave, so we stopped them."

"I know. I saw the media reports. But how?" he asked, taking a seat in her casual area.

"That 'hive mind' thing, plus some loose orders on what needed to be done and in what order, then turned my friends loose," Muriel replied.

"So why were you standing off?"

"To destroy any missiles that they managed to get off before they could be shut down," she said.

"Uh, huh. And how do you destroy missiles?"

"Oh, that's simple. You just disassemble the atoms," Muriel said, smiling sweetly.

"Yea, right. Now tell me another one."

"OK, it's like a laser, but not a laser. You pump power through a bunch of tubes that are in a tube, to make it all line up one way. With enough power, you literally strip the atoms down to subatomic particles without any radiation. A non-nuclear result, because it doesn't have time to build up a chain reaction. So the object just disperses in the air as subatomic particles and harmless," Muriel said. "Simple."

"Grrr. Do you have any idea how frustrating it is to get a straight answer out of you?"

"Well, no, actually I don't. I never have a problem getting a straight answer out of me," she replied with a grin.

General Stuart just rubbed his face, then took a deep breath. "Muriel," he said, "will you PLEASE show me how to do that laser thing?"

"Why, sure," she replied, sending it to him, mentally. "All you had to do was ask."

Ted had come in during the interchange and taken a seat. He'd been hard pressed to

keep from laughing during the whole thing. He knew Muriel well enough to realize that she was just pulling the General's chain a bit, and wasn't surprised when Stuart turned to him and asked, "Have you beaten her for her behavior, lately? I think she's due."

"Not me. She's dangerous. She might end up beating me, and how would that look. Besides, if I tried to lay a hand on her about twenty million Envoys would be in here showing me the error of my ways. Nope. I like my job. I don't feel like getting fired because my co-leader is a bit fractious and outrageous at times," Ted said, laughing.

"Besides," Mata said, coming into the area, "nobody beats Muriel for being outrageous." She handed Muriel some pages and said, "Here's the final tally, as far as we can tell. Basically, two international banks, three oil companies, a number of assorted business – some of which are legitimate, the Secretary of the Treasury as well as his counterparts in five different countries, some electronics manufacturers – some of which own recording studios or movie studios, a slew of car manufacturers – who, by the way, all have ties to the oil companies, the major arms manufacturers, the heads of three stock or commodities markets, and China."

"WHAT? A whole country?" Muriel asked, dumbfounded.

"Well, essentially, yes. At least the power in the country," Mata replied. "And that's just the top tier. And they control such things as publishers, religions, many of the top Internet businesses, and any number of illegal or semi-illegal businesses like drugs, human smuggling, prostitution – including child prostitution, clothing manufacturers, commercial software manufacturers – including many games manufacturers, gambling, sports franchises, political parties, and essential products like food, utilities, steel, wood, mortgage lending institutions and smaller banks, and advertising. There's a lot more there, and we're working on creating a tree form that would show all the connections and cross connections. The list isn't complete, but it at least shows how extensive and pervasive this has gone. Oh, and I didn't mention and should have, that we see direct and indirect connections to several countries and, finally, the reasons they have the attitudes they do."

"Can any of this be tracked, legally?" Ted asked.

"All of it. It's what took so long. Contracts, agreements, treaties in the case of countries, emails, financials, social networking, holding companies that are semi-hidden. Then there's software used in the stock markets and commodities markets, and in the skimming of pennies from bank accounts, and the real reason that the banks have kept trying to add various charges to depositor's accounts. By the way, credit cards are also lumped in that group, as they're either backed by banks directly or are controlled by holding companies," Mata said.

"What about judges?" Muriel asked.

"There's a few, in this country, that are controlled directly, and more that are controlled indirectly. Other countries we don't have complete information on, yet, but it looks pretty much like they're affected, too. The whole 'good old boy' network in Washington, for example,

is suspect,” Mata replied.

“We need to get this information to the President as soon as possible. Copies, only. We keep the originals in case we have to take further action,” Ted said.

“Already sent, on a set of CD's,” Mata replied. “Actually, I sent them to Melanie. I could send a set to Adam Frank in the FBI, too, if you like. Oh, and that country wants their pilots back. They wanted the planes, too, but that's impossible.”

“I'll have to think about sending the pilots back. Basically, it was assault with intent to kill, assault with a deadly weapon, use of weapons of mass destruction, and an informal declaration of war against Home. I'm not happy with that kind of attitude from a whole country. I may just go digging some more, and see what I can find out. The leadership of the country may be eligible for a one-way trip Home.”

General Stuart just looked from one to the other during the discussion. As it progressed, his mouth dropped further and further open. Finally, he said, “I'm not sure I should be hearing any of this! This is the sort of thing that's usually discussed in private between the heads of a country.”

“We ARE the heads of the country – or what passes for a country here, in America,” Ted said. “Muriel and I are the co-leaders of Home. And we get our input from the Envoys, particularly Bart and Mata, who are in touch with the minds of the rest of the Envoys. The attack took place in Enclave airspace which, by the way, is declared as a no-fly zone. We have the right to defend ourselves, which we did without any loss of life on either side, no injuries on either side, and only property damage to the attacking country. We have shown remarkable restraint in our behavior. And though Envoys can't judge, we can. Or at least make decisions that amount to a judgment. Nor are we bound by the whole legal mumbo-jumbo that exists in this and several other countries.”

“What you're saying, Ted, is that we hold the same type of power of judgment for crimes committed as royalty used to hold,” Muriel said.

“Yes. And, since we already have the evidence, as well as the eye witness account of the actions against us, a trial would be ludicrous. Were we simple home owners that were faced with a break-in by an armed robber, we would have been within our rights to shoot him. We didn't. We held him for the responsible authority, which also happens to be us. And, in our capacity as leaders of Home, we can send them there for judgment,” Ted said. “One of the basic tenets of the rule of society is that one cannot claim that they were only following orders. This was established in the Nuremberg Trials. And we are not signatories to the subsequent International Criminal Court, and are therefore not bound to relinquish the prisoners to their dubious judgment. However, I'll wait for further information from the President. At least for the time being. I won't wait forever.”

“Muriel? Can I speak to you?” Fran was standing in the entrance to her office.

“Of course. Let's take this upstairs, so we don't disturb these people,” Muriel said as

she immediately rose and went to Fran. They translated to her great room and once again Muriel set up a second recliner beside and facing her.

"I don't know what to do," Fran began. "Dad's out of a job, now, and mom never was working. They can't afford the house, or the car, and dad has no one to take care of him."

"These are things that we can solve, Fran, depending on your feelings and what you want to do. Let me give you some ideas, and we can kick this around to see what we come up with. First, as far as the house and car go, and any other bills, since you're a Citizen of Home and an Ambassador, we can cover them out of the Enclave operating expenses. That takes care of that problem. Oh? You didn't know that you were an Ambassador? Take a look at your passport. Ted changed that for each of you kids a while back, because of the things you've added to the knowledge of humans that the Envoys wanted, as well as the things you kids have come up with, individually. It also gave you some weight when acting for or on behalf of Home or Enclave, such as the rescue mission."

"Now," Muriel went on, "as for the rest, some of this will be up to you. We can set your parents up with a place to stay, here in Enclave, until everything is settled out. Whether you stay with them would be up to you. Or, we could simply set your father up in a room in the Guest House. He'd be cared for, there, as well as get his meals and laundry and such while he works through whatever he needs to work through. The same with your mother. Oh, and by the way, we'd do the same thing that we did with my parents house. It would be monitored and cared for by Envoys until it was either reoccupied or sold, or whatever your parents decide."

"As for your dad," she said, "he's had someone in attendance since you returned him from Home. We knew that you wouldn't be able to do it, and that you have things to work through, too. And NO ONE is blaming you. Not one bit. That's not why we're doing it. He's a human being and in pain, and Envoys are nurturers and protectors. They took it upon themselves to help him work through his side of it and gain some balance. Your mother, on the other hand, I'm not sure about. I don't know whether she wants to be with your dad, or you, or my parents, or on her own. She'll have to come to a decision one way or another, but it needn't be a final decision. This is a time of flux, and things may change from moment to moment. And that's fine. We'll work with it, and with each of you. OK?"

"OK. That helps. I didn't want them to lose the house and everything that they've worked for because of this. Thanks. As for the rest, I'll have to ask mom. Right now, she's shuttling back and forth between your parents and dad. Your parents have been wonderful. Your mom has been talking with mine, and your dad with my dad. Not accusing, just talking and listening."

"And you feel lost because you don't have anyone to talk things out with. Oh, Fran. I'm always here for you, and so is your Envoy. And any other help you want or need, we can find a way or make one. And, before you say it, you are NOT imposing on anyone," Muriel said. "If we didn't want to do this, we wouldn't. You're my friend. My parents regard you the same way – a friend. And with your status in Enclave, and the things that you've done for Enclave, there isn't an Envoy here that wouldn't try to help all they could. Better?"

"Yea. I guess. I just wish I could get over the feeling that I created a problem, and now I'm expecting everyone else to solve it for me, like I was a spoiled child," Fran said.

"Nope. You didn't cause it. And those that did are in custody," Muriel said.

::Muriel, honey. Can your mother and I come up?::

::Hold on::

"Fran, my parents are downstairs. Would you mind if they came up?"

"I guess."

::Come on, dad. Fran's here, too::

"Ah, Fran," Fred said as he and Lily translated in. "We forgot to tell you. Your mom and one of the Envoys sat down and figured out what bills needed to be paid. They're covered. A group of them went over the house and did the same thing that was done to mine. They strengthened the structure and checked the electrical and plumbing and such. They also had the car serviced, so it doesn't knock any more and has better tires. They said that, because you're an Ambassador, this all went on the Enclave account. No problem. Where an Ambassador lives is an Embassy, itself. Caleb has had two Envoys stay with your father to help him through his crisis, and has offered your mother the same. She's thinking about it. But she says that she gets better help from Lily and you."

"You're mother's a bit confused, right now, as to what she wants to do. On the one hand, she wants to be with you. You're her daughter, after all. But on the other, well, she still has deep feelings for your dad," Lily said. "We don't mind having her stay with us, but by the same token we won't force her either way. Same with you, really, except that we enjoy having you there. It wasn't until you came that we realized what we missed about our wayward daughter that lives across Enclave from us, now. The noises. The normal sounds of a girl growing up. I sometimes wonder if Muriel ever WAS a normal girl."

"Oh, thanks, mom. Now you're saying that I'm abnormal?"

"No, but I don't think there's a way you could be classified as anything so pedestrian as normal, either, Muriel," she said. Then she turned back to Fran. "What I'm trying to say is that you are welcome to stay with us as long as you like. You are not an imposition. Nor are we replacement parents. We're friends that enjoy your company. And we understand what you're going through, and what your parents are going through, and will do everything we can to help without interfering." Fran got up and went to Lily, and hugged her.

"Mrs. White"

"Just Lily, dear. I haven't been 'Mrs. White' to you for years. Friends don't bother with formalities like that."

"Lily, then. I don't know what to say!"

"Well, certainly it's nothing that needs to be said, then. Come on. You're mother's at the house and would like to talk to you. Come on" And they translated out.

"Muriel," her dad had stayed behind. "I wanted to talk to you alone for a minute."

"Sure, dad. What's up?"

"Well . . . we didn't want you to feel that we were replacing you, or something. I mean"

"Dad. I don't feel replaced. Nor do I feel you love me any less. I was the one that suggested that she stay with you for a while, till things sorted out. Mainly because I knew that you and mom could help her, and would know when to holler for help if you needed it. Just as I hollered for help when I realized that this one was beyond me," Muriel said.

"Well, it may be beyond all of us. But we'll take it one step at a time and work through it. Fran's mom has been shuttling between her house and ours, now, and it's starting to wear on her. She won't stay with us, but she can't stay around him when he starts tearing himself down."

"Dad, we could put them up in two separate rooms in Guest House. I think they have some adjoining rooms that have an internal door between them. That way she'd have a safety valve, and still be able to be with him when she could. Does she have an Envoy?"

"Not that I know of. We've been shuttling her back and forth."

"OK, I'll have Mata get one to work with her. We'll pull the same trick on her that Mata played on me. Female, and middle aged, for her, and worldly wise I think. Not hide the fact that she's an Envoy, but let Fran's mother's mind play tricks on her to make her more comfortable. That will take some of the strain off you, because the Envoy will be a dispassionate person to talk with, and one that CAN'T be judgmental. You've got your security squad that can help you and mom over the rough spots. And I'm always available, and you know how to reach me quickly," she said.

"I'm going to suggest something that might help the situation. Think about it and see how it appears to you. I think Fran should spend some time here, days, with the rest of our friends. Partly because they're used to working together to work through problems. Partly to get some normalcy back into her life," Muriel said.

"That's one of your intuitions, isn't it, Muriel. One of those pathways that you see through other people's pain."

"Yea. Something like that. I just don't know if it's the right time for it. But it feels right."

"Then I'll see what I can do with it. I've never known you to go wrong with your intuitions. Even that thing with the school, or with the missiles. I'm still embarrassed about the way I behaved over that."

"No reason to be, dad. We were both going through new things, then. I'm just glad that you and mom were able to accept me as I am, now. And I know that had to be rough."

"Yea, well, watching you put stripes on your friends kinda put the cap on that one. Suddenly I realized that you really could not only do things beyond what I could understand then, but could teach them. And I felt old. Then Fran, our security chief, started in on us about taking the training so we'd understand you a little better, and the next thing I knew I was doing some pretty fantastic things, myself. You should see how your mother and I do dishes, now, for instance."

"Yea. You don't. Your security chief and detail do them. Chuck told me when I saw him doing it. He said it's something mom came up with, and Fran saw it and wanted to learn. Now they won't let you two do dishes any more. They're having too much fun," Muriel said, and grinned.

"Wait a minute! You mean that little trick is all over, now?"

"Yep. It got fed back to the Envoys through your security chief, and they all know it. And there's all sorts of implications and uses for the procedure you two came up with. You just paid your 'room and board', even if you didn't have to. Addictive, isn't it."

"Yea," Fred said, thoughtfully. "Yea, it is. And you don't think about it, really, you just find easier ways to do something and come to find out you're using the training in ways that nobody thought of before. I'm going to have to think about that one a bit. I bet there's other things we do that the training has slipped into that the Envoys should know about. Well, I'd better be getting back. Your mother and I just thought you ought to know that we don't think of your friend as a replacement, but as an added blessing."

"OK, dad. I get the message." He translated out, and a second later Muriel rejoined the group in her casual area.

Chapter 41

The Unanswered Question (Tuesday afternoon)

"Muriel," Mata said, as she translated in, "you have guests at the main gate asking for you."

"Oh? Anyone I know?"

"Well, one of them, maybe. He's acting as spokesperson for the group and says that Melanie told him to look you up."

"Oh, oh. I wonder what I did, now. Well, I'd better go find out," Muriel said.

"Take a squad with you."

"OK, Mata." And first squad joined her outside her doors. They translated to the main gate, and Muriel burst out laughing. "I think I'm going to need more than a squad for this. And I think I know what it's all about," she sent to Mata.

"Hi! My name is Muriel. Welcome to Enclave," she said.

"Hi. I don't know if you remember me, but I'm Corporal Walters, ma'am. I was on guard at the President's office when you and Officer Carter made a bit of a hash of a Secret Service officer. I'm still not sure I believe all that I saw. But Officer Carter said to look you up if I wanted the training."

"Uh, huh. And you brought friends," Muriel said.

"Um, well, when I talked to the CO, he said I should bring a few other people. So, anyway, when I went back to Officer Carter to find out how to find you, and how many people she thought you could handle, she said it would be useless to send out people that couldn't take the training."

"I think I can see where this is going," Muriel said. "She got you to make a mental link, you went back to the barracks and tried it on a few friends, and the next thing you know the bunch of you could talk to each other in your heads, but it hurt. You went back to Melanie to find out why, and she contacted your CO and got emergency leaves for the bunch of you, and translated you here. Right?" asked Muriel.

"Um, well, yea. Something like that," Walters said.

"Uh, huh. OK, anyone still got a headache?" Five people raised their hands. "Come on up here, and I'll take care of them," she said. And a minute later they showed signs of

extreme relief. "OK, now, how many are there?"

"Um, about fifty, I think," Walters said. "Is that a problem?"

"Yea, but it's my problem, and I'll solve it. OK, I think the first thing is to get you rooms. While you're getting settled in, I'll get some help to get you all trained. If you'll follow me, please." Muriel walked the short distance to Guest House, and asked the Envoy on duty at the desk if they'd be able to handle so large an influx. Minutes later, the desk area was flooded with Envoys each taking an individual Marine to his room and showing him where everything was. The group was mixed between male and female, and the Envoys matched the gender of the troops they selected.

"They'd be pleased to help out, if you don't mind, Muriel," the Guest House manager said. "We all know your training, though we haven't practiced it. But if you give them a little direction, they can pass it on to the Marines and get them through the training."

"OK, we'll try it your way. I've had some experience doing that with smaller groups with part of the training. Let's see how it works for larger ones," Muriel said. She asked the manager to have his staff bring them to the training room, and she proceeded there, herself.

When they'd gathered, Muriel said, "The people next to each of you is an Envoy. They're going to be your direct trainers, getting suggestions from me as we go along, and working with you to get you through as quickly as we can. You'll find that this is a bit less formal than classes you've had in the military. The reason is that we don't believe in failure. If you can pass the first test, and you all did, then we will work at finding ways for you to understand and manage the rest of it. I'll be linked, mentally, with your trainers, so I'll know if there are problems and help work on finding ways to get around them."

With the help of the manager, links were made to his staff, and a group mind was set up, and the training began. Surprisingly enough, the first parts of it – learning to see souls and getting connected to power and shielding – went very quickly. Then the room was divided up between men and women and partitioned off, and the fun began. There were the normal accidents that she expected with learning how to create their own uniforms, and it was about an hour before they all had the process down pat, and could change from one to another without any problems. And at that point, she called a break and lines formed up for use of the restrooms, and to get coffee or other beverages.

"That's the hard part," Muriel told the manager. "The rest is pretty much just learning the procedures and practicing them until they're comfortable, then having them go to Home. And now, I've got to figure out places I can send them on their first translations."

"If you don't mind, I may have some suggestions, there," he said, and outlined a number of different places that would be vacant at this time of day, as well as the troops rooms, that could be used. Muriel added the street outside her office as another point. Fifteen minutes later, the popcorn machine began, with troops popping in and out under the supervision of the Guest House staff Envoys. While that was going on, Muriel alerted Melanie's dad to the fact that a bunch of Marines would be making their first visit Home, and

she could feel his grin at the news. He assured her that there would be an honor guard to greet them and help reduce the shock.

As the frequency of the popcorn action began to taper off, Muriel passed the staff the word to use their discretion about having them take the trip Home. It took a little over an hour for them all to be processed through the trip, and some came back a bit shaky. But all returned successfully, and even the shaky ones were soon ready to receive their stripes and passports. Ted showed up with General Stuart just before Muriel was going to apply them and the room was called to attention.

“As you were, people. I just came in to congratulate you on your achievement,” General Stuart said, his stripes already visible to the now trained personnel. “I also understand that you are all from the President's Guard, and this training will make you a doubly Honor Guard for him. With this training you will be able to see certain types of trouble coming before it can reach him, and pass the word to the Secret Service officers that also guard him. With the 'battlefield first aid' package that you will get in a few minutes, you'll be able to treat him for anything from a hangnail to massive, life threatening trauma. And, as you go to other assignments, these techniques will find ways to help you and those around you, protecting you and others that need protection. You've been given a great responsibility, and I know that you will acquit yourselves to the best of your ability and in the true spirit of the United States Marine Corps.”

General Stuart stepped back and Muriel took his place. “Now, think of the gem or metal that you want for your fifth stripe. Good. And it's done, people.”

As she stepped back, Mark translated into her place. “My name is Mark, and I'm an Envoy. I'm also what passes for a doctor here in Enclave. The techniques I use are nothing like those of normal human doctors, and it's those techniques that I'll be giving you as one massive mental dump. It will open up over the next couple of days, so no one trip over a shoelace until then.” This brought chuckles from the crowd. “If your Envoys would please link to me and to each of you, we'll be done in a minute.” And it was, and Mark translated back out.

Muriel took his place again, and said, “Each of you know what a 'no pocket' is, now. If you would look in there for a small, green booklet . . .” And the mob pulled out there Home passports. “You are all, now, considered Citizens of Home. This is an adopted citizenship. What it means is that you managed to go to Home and return under your own power, and that Home acknowledges this by awarding you citizenship. It does not mean that you have to support Home in any dealings with people on earth. You still retain your original citizenship. However, there are perks. You can travel to Home any time you like. You can come here any time you like. While you are here, room and board and a great many other things will be free to you. You will immediately be recognized by any Envoy or anyone with the training you just got as also being trained. It also means that, should you need to, you can call on others with training, even if they aren't part of your unit. Ask Melanie Carter about that, sometime, and how she called on us and we called on her in emergency situations. Congratulations.”

As the crowd dispersed, Ted came up beside Muriel and said, “I found out why Melanie

dumped them on you. And I don't blame her. We were looking for the principles of this mess. We forgot to look at the ancillaries, such as lawyers. The President was inundated by a mob of them trying to get their clients released on one spurious reason or another. They got it sorted, mostly by begging, borrowing or stealing every able bodied person that they could in the area to pull raids on all the law offices, while charging the individuals with conspiracy to commit treason. And THAT charge held. It also brought in a lot of collaborative evidence to back up what we had. Coffin nails, all of it. We have been requested to create a prison to hold those convicted of treason for the rest of their lives, since the United States doesn't have the death penalty for treason any more."

"Well," Muriel replied, "considering how well behaved this group was, and thanks to the generosity of the manager, here in Guest House, and the loan of some of his staff, it was all sorted out rather quickly and easily."

"So I see. About fifty people in one morning," Ted said, with a grin. "I guess that puts you back in the running for top trainer."

"Oh, piffle. You put me in this position, I see no reason to compete for it. And if you'd like it back"

"No you don't, young lady," Ted said. "You got the position fair and square by being more outlandish than the circumstances you found yourself in, and creating new ways of doing things on the spot while being trained, yourself." Muriel snapped her fingers as if saying 'oh, heck, I tried', and they both laughed.

"You know," she said, reflectively, as they left the room, "I didn't even think about how outlandish it was, after the first shock of hearing that I could learn to do these things. I never thought, 'but people can't see souls or draw power or create a shield. People aren't able to move from one point to another, instantly'. None of that even occurred to me. Mata just said, 'this is what you need to do', and I found a way to do it. Maybe that's why I was successful in learning, and am able to teach like I do. I don't offer them the opportunity to think that they can't do it."

"Yep," Ted said. "I'd say that was a reasonable rationalization of it. Whether it's all of it or not, I don't know. I do know that your way works, and it's your leadership – even if you never trained another person – that will keep it going. YOU did it, therefore they can do it. You don't set yourself up as some important person. You're just you – a twelve year old girl – that learned something new and wants to pass it on to others. And that's why you're an Ambassador, and the head of training."

"Oh," Ted said, changing the subject, "Fran sorted things out. Her father apologized to her, and said that he didn't expect that she'd forgive him, but that he was sorry. We've set them up with a place that looks nothing like her home, and he and her mother are staying there. That's inside Enclave, by the way. Her parents didn't demand that she come back, and she's thinking of having an apartment or something for herself, like you have. And her parents agree. YOUR parents must have made a major impact on them. We'll find something for Fran's father to do to keep busy. Real work, not make-work."

"That's good," Muriel said. "I was worried about that, and got pulled away for this before I could look into it any further." Muriel stopped at the front counter and thanked the manager of Guest House, profusely, for the help he'd given her and the loan of the Envoys that made it so successful. And he beamed, and thanked her, in return, for allowing him to help. Then she and Ted translated to her office.

"It's sorted," Mata said, as they appeared. "The ones from other countries, those countries have been appraised of the situation and supplied with the evidence. They've requested extradition, and will be charging them under their laws concerning treason. We've got Envoys transporting them, now. The ones in this country, about half have plead guilty, and will be sentenced within the month. The rest are trying to fight it, especially the top tier. None of their legal tricks have worked, so far, for trying to get them out of prison on bail. And the evidence against them is overwhelming. Unless a judge is bought, or something, they don't stand a chance. And since the lawyers defending them were appointed by the courts – their assets were frozen, and they're unable to use their normal lawyers because they're all in jail – they really don't have the ammunition to be able to play some of the legal dirty tricks to even get a postponement. Oh, and the country that the pilots came from? They want them returned to stand trial. I'm not sure what the actual charges are, but the country is adamant that they will be put to death for trying to start an unauthorized war. They waived the request for the planes, realizing, finally, that they'd been destroyed."

Bart came in, and said, "I have some better news for you. The stock markets and commodities markets have been shut down. Congress approved the measure in emergency session once they saw how those markets had been manipulated. All stocks are frozen, and the companies have been given thirty days to buy them back or lose them. There's still some question about whether those markets will re-open. But if they do, it won't be until very rigid controls have been placed on them. And we've got three multinational banks that are in danger of collapsing because they don't have the funds to cover the deposits. It seems that, in other countries, the names of the banks and their connection to this mess were made public. What with the Internet and all, that news got back to this country, and now everyone wants to pull their money out of them. They've been closed until further notice."

"So, now what's left to fight?" asked Muriel.

"Illegal drugs, illegal prostitution, terrorism," said Ted.

"Is there such a thing as legal prostitution?" asked Muriel.

"Yep. Some states have it, I understand. And other countries have it," he replied.

"Then there's the abuse that religions have heaped on their 'flocks'," Ted said. "I don't mind the religions, but the abuses have got to stop, both to their own people and to those outside of the religion."

"So, which one do we start with?" asked Muriel

“Ah! Now that's the question. And as soon as our illustrious troubleshooter comes up with an answer and tells me, I'll be sure to let you know,” Ted replied.

“Yea, right. Leave it all up to me. All right, then, here's my answer. We wait until something pops, and then deal with it. What do you want to bet is first? Drugs or terrorism?” she asked.

“No bet. No bet, because the one may have ties to the other. Even religion may be involved in it,” Ted said.

“You're kidding!” exclaimed Muriel.

“Nope. That sect that harassed Fran? Direct ties from the leadership of the sect to the lower level of the top of the pyramid. And they were tied to that splinter group political party, too. In fact, all the political parties are now under investigation. So are many of the laws that previous Congresses passed and presidents signed into law. We rolled up so many people in this conspiracy that the rest have now got the fear of us in them.” Ted's grin was rather grim. “This is NOT the way I wanted to approach religion. I was willing to let it go their own way, as long as they caused no harm. But this . . . and some of the other abuses that we've seen . . . they may just be the next big thing. I take back everything I said about your taking that one pack to Home and letting them be judged by themselves. They're worse than I thought.”

“OK,” Muriel said, “then I guess we wait for the next big thing.”

The Dogs of War Cheat Sheet

References and . . . well . . . references

(Source material for some of the odd-ball things I've put in the book)

Chapter 1, pg. 1: "The Dogs of War". A phrase from Act 3, Scene 1, line 273 of William Shakespeare's Julius Caesar: "Cry 'Havoc!', and let slip the dogs of war". See Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_dogs_of_war_%28phrase%29

Chapter 1, pg. 4: "Once again Mata explosively ejected a grape and berry combination toward her computer screen." Ongoing gag. In at least one on-line blog, it's called 'keyboard alert', and for the same reason. Sticky making liquids expelled with some force due to surprise or shock can do nasty things to electronic equipment.

Chapter 1, pg. 5: " . . . it is highly irregular for this Embassy to be contacted concerning something that is so apparently a purely national affair. " What follows is the basis of, effectively, a new treaty – that Enclave can be contracted with to engage in a rescue mission, without being classed as being in league with or support of a country or government. This becomes very important in other chapters and books.

Chapter 3, pg. 18: "You do know," Don said, "that under your clothes you're naked." This may take some thought for some people. Don is NOT saying that he can see through Muriel's clothes, though that's the implication because of the choice of words and their placement. Here's a test for you. You're wearing clothes. Take them off, then tell me what you're wearing. See? That's why, to the Envoys, it was merely an obvious statement. This is simply a nasty little 'gotcha' gag.

Chapter 4, pg. 22: Men's suits. The history of men's suits can be found on Wikipedia, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_suits#Men.27s_suits. The abysmal fashion started in the 17th century and was mildly modified in the 19th. "But, it's the traditional way to dress!" I'll cover 'tradition' in another book. But suffice it to say that doing something just because it's the way it was always done is not a good enough reason. And formal wear is worse.

Chapter 4, pg. 23: Scottish Formal wear for men. Examples of the jackets can be seen at <http://www.blacktieguide.com/Supplemental/Scottish.htm>

Chapter 4, pg. 26: "I'm not wearing kilts," Ted responded, firmly. "Too drafty." It's a mind-set. Wearing kilts is similar to the 'I'm going that way and nothing is going to stop me'. It is NOT a defiance, but it is a declaration – an almost subconscious form of ignoring the fashion police at their most atrocious. Drafty? Yes, a bit. But anyone with self-confidence and the will to try can learn to ignore the feeling. Actually, most of it is caused by the man feeling exposed, even when he isn't.

Chapter 5, pg. 33: Class 'A' uniforms (standard dress uniform). Based on the Marine Corps officer's uniform. A view of them can be seen partway down the page. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uniforms_of_the_United_States_Marine_Corps. Muriel gets it

wrong, and it's corrected at another time. She has the pants the same color as the jacket, instead of differenced.

Chapter 7, pg. 46: “Well, Mr. Important – or may I call you Not? ” This is a double joke. He said his name was not important, and she ran with that as a name. But there's also the pun of suggesting that she not call him – may I call you not.

Chapter 9, pg. 56: “Of course. You don't expect me to play with his . . . ,” Ted raised his eyebrows at her, “troops, do you?” This is an obvious 'fill-in-the-blanks' joke. For those of you with a clean mind – as if that's going to happen – the word that Ted raised his eyebrows over was 'privates'. And, of course, that's a double entendre. If you STILL have a clean mind, then I'm not going to explain it to you.

Chapter 9, pg. 57: “Obviously, you've never heard of the Peter Principle,” Ted said. The Peter Principle “was formulated by Dr. Laurence J. Peter and Raymond Hull in their 1969 book *The Peter Principle*, a humorous treatise, which also introduced the 'salutary science of hierarchiology.' And, as a short form explanation, Muriel nailed it. See Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Principle.

Chapter 9, pg 57: Managing upwards. See the following PDF file for a description. <http://www.uthscsa.edu/gme/documents/TheArtofManagingUp.pdf>. Again, Muriel short-forms this corollary to the Peter Principle, but does it in a humorous way.

Chapter 10, pg. 58: “Well, Marshal, I can't very well jump a first lieutenant to general in one move. Especially one named Marshal” Oh, heck. I'll just give you the link on this one. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Marshall.

Chapter 13, pg. 87: “The mouse that spoke quietly and was heard by everyone. ” Cold war satire, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Mouse_That_Roared.

Chapter 14, pg. 84: Open Source Software. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open-source_software.

Chapter 15, pg 106: “General Stuart of the Air Force ”. A big thing is made of the difference in the spelling of the name. That's because there WAS a General James Stewart of the Air Force. He was, perhaps, better known as the actor, Jimmy Stewart. In fact, a later reference is to one of his films, 'Harvey'. Where his 'co-star' was an invisible pooka. For more information, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Stewart.

Chapter 16, pg 109: 'Flying saucer hat'. Hat worn with Air Force Dress blues. The nickname comes from the distinctive look of the hat. See <http://www.armynavysales.com/products/air-force-dress-cap/>.

Chapter 17, pg. 116: “A New Day Begins”. This is a quiet echo of the song, Memory, from the musical 'Cats', where the last line is “Look a new day has begun.” If you're unfamiliar with the work, see <http://www.metrolyrics.com/memory-lyrics-cats.html>.

Chapter 17, pg. 116: Lead lined underwear. Backhand reference to Superman being unable to see through lead. Even though it was said as a joke, Muriel's response had Ted blushing.

Chapter 18, pg. 123: "A Time of War, and A Time of Peace ". Ecclesiastes 3:8

Chapter 18, pg. 126: "It's kind of the reverse of what a Senator tried to do in showing that there were too many frivolous lawsuits. " This actually happened. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawsuits_against_God.

Chapter 19, pg. 129: "If You Wish for Peace, Prepare for War ". See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Si_vis_pacem,_para_bellum.

Chapter 21, pg. 141: "Some of it came from some movie with kids on broomsticks. " This is an obvious reference to quidditch, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quidditch> from the Harry Potter series, but is actually closer to a three dimensional hockey game, and is usually referenced that way in later chapters.

Chapter 22, pg. 150: Immelmann maneuver. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immelmann_turn.

Chapter 28, pg. 196: "It's so easy even I can do it. " There used to be a commercial on television that had had an announcer saying, 'It's so easy even a caveman can do it.' This parody's that.

Chapter 29, pg. 202: "A science fiction author wrote something like this in a rather famous, if dated, book. " 'Stranger in a Strange Land', by Robert A. Heinlein. Oh, and if that isn't bad enough, there's always the theory of Logos that Heraclitus came up with – that we start as part of god, elect to come to earth as humans, and eventually return to being part of god. Heinlein was not only an engineer, he may have been a philosophy student. This, and the reworking of $E=MC^2$ – Energy equals Mass times the square of the speed of light – making mass slow energy, and energy fast mass, and will as what governs the change, is the heart of the entire concept of shields. It's also magic without the magic.

Chapter 30, pg. 210: "I don't think we're seeing the history of Envoys. I think we're seeing the progression of religions." All right. It's a very crude example of religious history. And no, there ISN'T any proof for it, simply because this actually strikes at TWO things – religion AND history. Religion, like any organization or entity, strives to protect itself. History is 'what happened in the past' as told by the victors. And it's already been shown in this book that religions had a major part in shaping that.

Chapter 31, pg. 217: Ghillie suit . https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghillie_suit.

Chapter 39, pg. 272: "What Happens in Enclave Stays in Enclave ". Obvious parody to a certain gambling Mecca in Nevada that shall remain nameless, but whose initials are Las Vegas.

Chapter 39, pg. 277: You've done a magnificent job. Like there were seven of you"
Allusion to the Magnificent Seven movie.

Chapter 41, pg. 287: "The Unanswered Question". Charles Ives. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Unanswered_Question.



Meet the Author

Craig A. Eddy

I'm 67, retired and proud of it. I live in a science fiction world. When I was 14, I wanted a computer that would do the things the room sized ones could do, but would fit in a briefcase. I was thinking small. What I ended up with a few years later was one that could do those things and fit in my shirt pocket. And it's just gotten better. I've been a CAD operator (18 1/2 years) and a number of other things in my life, and now I write fantasy novels for my own amusement using a computer with no paid software on it. All free. Even the operating system (Linux).

Currently writing Fantasy books that are available as PDF files under Creative Commons License.

Bragging rights:

I have a Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy a B.A. in BS